

THE PRACTICE OF
THE PRESENCE OF GOD

PARACLETE ESSENTIALS

the PRACTICE *of*
THE PRESENCE
OF GOD

BROTHER LAWRENCE

Foreword by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION BY

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FOREWORD

Matthew's Gospel tells us that after Jesus began his public ministry, the news about him spread and "people brought to him all who were ill and with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed." Jesus knew how to draw a crowd, but the people who flocked to him were not the sort of folks who pay to attend a seminar on spirituality. As a matter of fact, they were not very religious at all. The sick and broken in Jesus' day had been told by every religious teacher they knew that their diseases and demons made them unclean. Jesus attracted crowds of people who thought they'd been cursed.

Seeing this crowd, Jesus pulled his disciples aside for their first teaching moment in Matthew's Gospel. Still high on the excitement of being called by a rabbi, the disciples would have been more than ready to sit at the feet of their Master. But they must have been surprised by Jesus' opening declaration: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You can almost imagine Jesus looking over the disciples' shoulders at the rag-tag crowd of rejects who had come to be healed. Everyone the disciples had ever known called this crowd cursed. But Jesus said they were blessed. The kingdom Jesus invites all of us into belonged to them.

Some years ago, I was reading Matthew's Gospel with a group of men at a homeless shelter. When we got to the fifth chapter, where Jesus offers this blessing to people who've been pushed

to the margins, a resident of the shelter jumped to his feet and shouted, “Hey, listen ya’ll! He’s talking to us.” After years of living on the streets and begging to get a meal, this fellow knew what it felt like to be cursed. His enthusiasm at hearing Jesus’ blessing helped me hear the words afresh. I hadn’t felt that kind of excitement during a Bible study in a long time.

The book you are holding in your hands has become a classic in Christian spirituality because it somehow articulates the joy that erupts when the crushed and the cursed hear the good news that we are, indeed, blessed by God. Brother Lawrence says God “tricked” him, surprising him with grace in just the place where he was sure he would be judged. His is the joy of the Prodigal Son coming home to his father’s outstretched arms. It is the joy of every person since Adam who has been overwhelmed by the chasm between themselves and God only to find that God lays down his own life to bridge that gap.

This book has been in print since its release in 1692 because we are made for the joy Brother Lawrence found. Like the Scriptures themselves, this book is timeless. And yet, rereading it in the midst of the challenges we face today, I am also convinced that this testament offers a particular gift to our time. For in a post-Christendom context, when we who follow Jesus must learn again how to live faithfully without being in control of society, Brother Lawrence reminds us where we find our greatest teachers—among the meek who will inherit the earth.

Before he was Brother Lawrence, Nicholas Herman served as butler to a prominent banker named Monsieur de Fieubet. Brother Lawrence knew firsthand the pecking order of the powerful in a kingdom built on pride. He carried this common sense

with him into religious life, imagining his role in the household of God as something like the menial and precarious role he had played in Fieubet's home. "I regard myself as the most wretched of all men," Brother Lawrence wrote in a letter, "torn with sores and full of stench, who has committed all sorts of crimes against his King." Yet, the surprise—the "trick" that brought Lawrence such joy—was that his Master not only forgave him, but he also invited him into conversation all day long. The practice of the presence of God was a gift to one who feared he was not worthy to step into the presence of his Master.

This is, notably, not a book "by" Brother Lawrence. It was rather compiled, and much of it written in the third person, by a teacher of the church in Lawrence's day. This is important if we are to understand the gift that Brother Lawrence is for our time. For we live in a time when words have become impoverished. The proliferation of publications—magazines, books, websites, blogs, texts, and ad after ad—has desensitized our culture to the power of words. More than that, however, Christian speech suffers from a particular lack of credibility in the context of our literary crisis. Where the church has spoken loudest and proudest, we have also been accused (and often found guilty) of hypocrisy, excess, and meanness.

In such a context, it is helpful to recall that Jesus did not write a book but lived a life. The books we have about Jesus testify to the power of his life, death, and resurrection. More important than well-crafted words was the fact that the truest Word of all had taken on flesh and lived among us. Though the early church had writers, they knew in their bones the power of an incarnated word. From the lives of the martyrs to Athanasius' biography

of Anthony, the best books of the Christian community before Christendom were books written about others who had been transformed by God.

If we are to know something of God's power to transform and renew the world in our own day, I suspect we will have to relearn the ancient pattern of celebrating lives caught up in the glory of God. The one who holds the pen or sits in front of the computer screen is only of marginal importance to such a practice. Yes, the written word is still important, and we can be grateful to all who have preserved it, translated it, and kept it up till now. But the power is in the word made flesh—the life of one who did not presume to write a book, but rather to practice the presence of God in a world where so many feel left alone.

“Blessed are the poor,” indeed, for in the poverty of our spirits and our words we are awakened to joy by a God who is rich in mercy.

—*Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove*
Rutba House

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Before I set out to translate the book you are about to read, I had an image of Brother Lawrence as a jolly monk who took pleasure in cleaning pots and cooking. What could he have to say to me?

As I began to read the sections of the book in which others wrote about Brother Lawrence, I felt a growing awareness that this humble lay brother led a life that does, indeed, have much to say to me. And when I read his own writings, I was struck by the depth of his love for God and his life lived in obedience, humility, and concern for others. Then I understood why I was translating this book: it was because I so needed to hear what it has to say. Session after session in front of the typewriter brought deeper and deeper conviction of who I am, and greater and greater hope for what God can do in a life wholly given to Him.

Twenty-five years after this translation's first release, it continues to be my prayer that as you follow the example of Brother Lawrence, you, too, will be filled with the presence of God.

—*Robert J. Edmonson, CJ*

INTRODUCTION

In the annals of Christian history, there are many heroes and heroines of faith, many inspiring examples of women and men who “toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.” The book of Hebrews in the New Testament gives us a great “roll call of faith” in the eleventh chapter. The author of that epistle reminds us that we are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” and clearly meant to strengthen and encourage those who may have been growing weary, or in danger of letting down in their spiritual warfare. The examples of those worthies who had gone before was meant to invigorate those who still stood on the front line of battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The Church, from very early times, began to take note and keep record of stalwart souls who stood the test and became an example for others. The Christian community made a practice of remembering these people, honoring their memory and taking heart by retelling incidents and stories remembered by those who knew them. These stories were passed on, and became the core of a whole literary tradition of “saints’ lives.”

As time went on, some of the stories were embellished with legends that crept in from pre-Christian sources, and it became fashionable to debunk and disbelieve the stories of saints. The skeptical mind can always find reason to refuse that which does not fit into its prejudged categories, and for this reason, many people miss the authentic blessing that could come from the study of the lives of these saintly individuals. And ironically, one

of the things that careful archeological research has done, both for the biblical stories and for the stories of the early Christian martyrs, is to underline the essential accuracy and truthfulness of many of our oldest legends!

Malcolm Muggeridge wrote a little book about six Christians from different periods to show how they witnessed to the reality of God in their own times. He compared them to spies left behind enemy lines, calling them “God’s Spies.” He called the book *A Third Testament*, making the point that God has not left Himself without witnesses in every age, and that it is the purpose of those people whom God chooses to call His people prophetically back to Himself.

In the case of Brother Lawrence, we do not have to depend on misty legends. What little information is available, we have directly from his own hand and from the writings of one who personally knew him, Abbé Joseph de Beaufort, vicar-general of the Diocese of Paris. The very paucity of material intrigues us and tempts us to want to know more, but what we have is enough.

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection was born Nicholas Herman in the French village of Herimenil in the province of Lorraine in 1611, of poor but pious parents. We know nothing of his schooling, though it could not have been extensive. His language, quoted several times, shows the rusticity of his peasant background, yet this very simplicity makes his wisdom and devotion all the more remarkable, since they always bear the originality and freshness of one who proceeds from inner knowledge, rather than repeating what has been learned from others.

As a young man, Nicholas “had the misfortune of becoming involved” in the military conflict between Lorraine and a neighboring German area. Such conflicts were all too common in Europe at that time. Thinking that he was a spy, the German troops captured Nicholas and threatened him with death. He was able to convince his captors that he was not a spy, and eventually they let him go.

Another armed conflict at this time brought Swedish soldiers into his home province, and in the ensuing battle, Nicholas was wounded. He returned to his parents’ home to recover. These two experiences ended whatever taste he had had for the military life.

By his own account, a remarkable spiritual awakening had occurred when he was eighteen years old, about the time he entered military service. De Beaufort’s words, dated August 3, 1666, tell it best:

He told me about his conversion at the age of eighteen before he entered the monastic life. God blessed him with an unusual and remarkable measure of his grace. One winter’s day he saw a tree stripped of its leaves, and considered that sometime afterward these leaves would appear again, followed by flowers and fruit. He then received a lofty awareness of the providence and power of God that never left him. This awareness caused him to become entirely detached from the world and gave him such love for God that he could not say whether it had increased during the more than forty years since he had received this gift.

Like every description of an encounter with the living God, words fail to do justice to it. Someone has commented that too many people who had mystical experiences that they admitted were ineffable, would then make the mistake of trying to put them into words. We can take our own inner awakenings, however—those indescribable moments when the heavens seem to open, and we catch a glimpse of something glorious beyond thought or words—and read Brother Lawrence’s words in light of them.

After leaving the military life, Nicholas was employed as footman to Monsieur de Fieubet, a prominent banker. A footman was a servant whose duty was to attend the door and the table, and to perform various other tasks. Concerning this time, Brother Lawrence recalled that “he was a clumsy fellow who used to break everything.”

The combined period of service in the military and as a footman lasted a number of years. It was one of the frequently remembered regrets in his later life that he did not more quickly leave the world to devote himself entirely to the service of God.

Nonetheless, drawn more and more from the vanity of the age, Nicholas sought counsel from an uncle who was a member of the Carmelite Order. The uncle confirmed his growing conviction that the only safe path was to withdraw entirely from the world and its subtle corruptions. “The air of the world is so contagious,” said the uncle, “that if it does not strike dead all who breathe it, it inevitably alters or corrupts the morals of those who follow its ways.”

The “ways” of his age were certainly among the most corrupt of history. For this was the age of Louis XIV, the Sun King.

Ambitious, vain, and convinced that everything was his by divine right, Louis made almost continuous war a part of his policy. Furthermore, his court was notorious for its immorality, vanity, and worldliness. The palace of Versailles today represents the worldly splendor with which the age was fascinated. In addition, the systematic persecution of Huguenots by the government led to the emigration of 250,000 people. Controversies within the Church stirred passions and resulted in the banishment of the great Archbishop François de Fénelon, who had been chosen earlier as tutor to the King's grandson and heir to the throne, and in the imprisonment of such other souls as Madame Guyon for her supposedly heretical teachings.

Nicholas first sought spiritual surrender in the solitude of a hermit's life. This he was able to do under the tutelage of a gentleman of means, who had himself become weary of the world and was seeking to devote himself fully to the spiritual life, "to taste how sweet the Lord is to those who search for Him with all their heart."

What had proved a blessed state of spiritual fulfillment for some, however, proved to be a place of torment for Nicholas. He found his own emotions running the gamut from joy and peace to sadness and agitation, and from fervor of devotion to complete dryness. It was not long before he realized that the hermit's life was not for him. In 1649, he presented himself as a candidate in the Order of Discalced (Barefooted) Carmelites in Paris.

The Carmelites consisted of lay brothers and brothers in Holy Orders, and their known history goes back to the thirteenth century, when a group of them lived near the well of Elijah the

prophet on Mt. Carmel in the Holy Land. They were one of the most austere of monastic communities, devoting themselves to prayer and contemplation. Shortly after the middle of the sixteenth century, a drastic reform had been attempted by St. Teresa of Avila and her disciple St. John of the Cross. Their work was so strongly opposed by the leaders of the Carmelites that ultimately the Order was divided officially between the regular Carmelites, practicing a modified, less severe form of religious life, and the barefooted Carmelites, who sought an even more austere form of self-denial. The refusal to wear shoes was intended to express reverence, humiliation, poverty, and penance, and the brothers wore sandals or went completely barefooted.

In this latter community, Nicholas found the theme that would echo through all his own writings and in those conversations that have been recorded: the absolute negation of everything that does not come from God. In this the Order was following the teaching of St. John of the Cross. The community also put great emphasis on prayer and meditation. Its constitution, drawn up after the division in 1567, prescribed three hours of prayer daily, and one of them, at least, was to be spent “reading aloud the point to be meditated on during the mental prayer that followed.”

When he entered the Carmelites, Nicholas was given the name of Lawrence of the Resurrection, by which he would be known to succeeding generations. The practice of giving new names to persons entering the Religious Life has a long history and is still in effect. He says that when he entered, he expected to be “flayed” for his clumsiness, but that instead, “God had fooled him, since he found only satisfaction,” and he adds that he often said to God, “You have deceived me!”

In his early days in the Religious Life, he often spent his entire prayer time rejecting stray thoughts and falling back into them again. In fact, he confessed, he had never been able to pray by a rule like the others, and that after the required time of meditation he would not have been able to say what it was about. How easy it is to identify with his difficulty in sustaining a spirit of prayer for a long period!

His solution to this difficulty was a simple one: he developed the habit of continual conversation with God. Whether at prayer or at work, it became his practice to focus his heart and mind on God, thanking Him, praising Him, and asking for His grace to do whatever had to be done. And if he allowed himself to forget God, he confessed that to Him, drawing his thoughts back to God, like wayward children.

Early in his novitiate, he was assigned to work in the monastery kitchen—possibly in recognition of his previous experience as a footman. Far from loving the kitchen, however, he had a natural aversion to it. But since he had determined to do everything for the love of God, he went prayerfully to his tasks, and for some fifteen years “found great ease in doing things” there.

In his later years, he was sent to Auvergne and Burgundy to purchase wine for the community, a task for which he felt totally inadequate. Two factors made the job particularly difficult for him: his lack of skill in business, and the fact that he was so crippled in one leg that he could not walk on the boat except by “rolling himself on the wine casks.” Again, he took his case to God, telling Him that it was His business he was embarked on, and after turning it all over to God, “not only was he able to complete his task, but it was done well.” Speaking of it later,

however, Brother Lawrence said that he did not know how it was done, “that no credit should be given to him at all.”

After these assignments, Lawrence was given the task of cobbling shoes, probably in deference to his lameness. In this “he found delight,” but professed that he was ready to leave it at any time to do whatever he was asked to do, “doing nothing other than rejoicing everywhere in doing little things for the love of God.”

It must not be assumed, however, that life was all smooth and happy for him. He had entered the Religious Life in “great trouble of spirit,” absolutely convinced that he was damned. For four years this state of spiritual uncertainty and anxiety stayed with him, and no amount of reasoning or counsel seemed to help. Then came the breakthrough.

Reasoning that he had entered the Religious Order only for the love of God, and that he had been trying to act only for Him, he decided that, whether damned or not, he would continue until death in the same way, trying to do whatever he did out of love for God. This resolution having been firmly established and lived out for a time, he ceased to wonder about heaven or hell, and he found a continual rejoicing and freedom of spirit.

His one concern seems to have been that he did not suffer enough! In his last illness, he did suffer severe pain from pleurisy, but his cheerful countenance so covered it that some of his brothers actually wondered if he was suffering at all.

His counsels, contained in four “conversations” and a brief collection of “Spiritual Maxims” or sayings that were found among his belongings after his death, lift up one theme continually: love for God is everything, and out of that love should

proceed a continual internal awareness of God and conversation with Him.

“Although we might do every possible penance,” he says, “if our penances are not done in love, they will not serve to erase a single sin.” In another place, he notes, “All we must do is recognize God’s intimate presence within us and speak to Him at every moment, asking Him for His help. In this way we will know His will in doubtful things and we will do well those things that He is clearly asking of us, offering them to Him before doing them and giving Him thanks for having done them once we have finished.”

After his death, his friend and admirer de Beaufort gathered his sayings, together with notes he himself had made of his conversations with Brother Lawrence, and published them for the edification of others. Both Fénelon and Madame Guyon quoted Brother Lawrence at her trial, but their association with the Quietist movement seems to have caused Brother Lawrence’s name and influence to fade quickly from the French scene. His words and counsels fell on receptive hearts, however, among English-speaking people, especially Protestants, who continued to publish and read him from that day to this.

In the nineteenth century, the English Quaker Hannah Whitall Smith called *The Practice of the Presence of God* “one of the most helpful books I know.” She continued, “It fits into the lives of all human beings, let them be rich or poor, learned or unlearned, wise or simple. The woman at her wash-tub, or the stonebreaker on the road, can carry on the ‘practice’ here taught with as much ease and as much assurance of success as the priest at his altar or the missionary in his field of work.”

The late Dean Willard Sperry of Harvard says this in his book *Strangers and Pilgrims*:

The story of Brother Lawrence's life and his remembered words are an example of "the simplicity that is in Christ." Christians in general have been agreed as to the nature of that simplicity. It is the winning of some "central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation," a peace which is achieved by a rigorous ordering of our desires rather than by their ruthless negation.

Dean Sperry continues:

What captivates us about the man is his candor, and his utter lack of anything approaching sentimentality. He not only hated to go on those occasional business trips, he disliked his routine cooking and washing dishes. The actual words are unequivocal. They speak of "his business in the kitchen, to which he naturally had a great aversion." There is moreover a disarming honesty in his statement that he got little satisfaction from set periods of prayer, and often found them dull and dry. Much of the difficulty which religion meets in its address to the world derives from a lack of precisely such blunt sincerity. The captain of our salvation was, it is true, made in all things like unto his brethren, and the Gospels are honest. But too many conventional Christians seem to have entered into a conspiracy of pretense or silence: pretense as to an enjoyment of unabated pleasures in religion and silence as to any spiritual pains or perplexities.

The experiences of which they speak seem too good to be true, or at least so good as to be beyond our powers.

Now Brother Lawrence made no pretenses, and if he did nothing else for us he did this: he broke the conspiracy of silence which surrounds certain of the problematical areas of Christian living. He would have understood what the old monk in *The Brothers Karamazov* meant when he said, "This above all, don't lie to yourself." It is reassuring to know that so gallant a soldier of Christ Jesus often found the warfare long. I once heard Canon Sanday of Christ Church tell a class that three-quarters of the honest intellectual work of the world is nothing but sheer drudgery. Having made one's peace with the fact, one can do it; it is only the pretense that it is always interesting which makes such work impossible. That was Brother Lawrence's verdict upon his task; he never pretended to like all its detail, but he "got on with the job." We understand him and love him for his realistic honesty.

This does not mean, however, that his work was intolerable. On the contrary, we are told that in spite of his aversion to his business in the kitchen, "he had found everything easy during the fifteen years he had been employed there," and that "he was very well pleased with the post he was now in." How is it that a man finds easy and pleasant a task for which naturally he has a great aversion? Brother Lawrence leaves us in no doubt as to the answer.

"Since I first entered the Religious Life, I have looked on God as the *Goal* and *End* of all the thoughts and affections of the soul.

“The most excellent method . . . of going to God is that of *doing our common business* without any view of pleasing men, and (as far as we are able) *purely for the love of God.*”

What an encouragement to us this man’s life can be! Issuing from a hidden, “ordinary” life, his influence has touched the lives of uncounted thousands of persons and helped them in their spiritual pilgrimage. Although Brother Lawrence was never canonized, there can be little doubt that he is among those choice souls who “followed the right, for Jesus’ sake, the whole of their good lives long.”

—*Hal M. Helms*

THE PRACTICE OF
THE PRESENCE OF GOD

1

EULOGY OF BROTHER LAWRENCE OF THE RESURRECTION

The Abbé of Beaufort delivered this Eulogy on the occasion of Brother Lawrence's death. Afterward, apparently at the request of others, he published it along with the conversations and letters that he had gathered. It was the first exposure of Brother Lawrence's way of life and prayer.

Eulogy

It is a consistent truth in the Scriptures that the arm of God is not shortened and that His mercy is not exhausted by our miseries. The strength of His grace is no less today than it was in the early days of the Church. It is His desire to perpetuate a life of holiness in men and women in every age. He always seeks out those who are willing to offer Him worship worthy of His greatness and majesty, and who, by the saintliness of their examples, can be models of virtue. He was not content just to place such people in the first centuries, but still raises up some from time to time whose lives demonstrate the worship of which He is worthy and are therefore a good example to others. These men and women, while retaining in themselves the first fruits of the Spirit, transmit that spirit to others and cause it to live in them as well.

The one whose life I would now call to your attention is Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a Discalced Carmelite Brother whom God raised up in our time to render to Him all the honor that is due Him, and to quicken all Christians by the rare example of his faithfulness in the practice of all Christian virtues.

His name before entering the monastic life was Nicholas Herman. His father and mother were very upright persons who led exemplary lives, instilling in him the fear of God from his youth up. They took particular care with his moral training, teaching him only those holy principles that are in conformity with the Gospels.

He was born at Herimenil in Lorraine, where he had the misfortune of becoming involved in its military operations. While he was in the army, God was already showing him His goodness and mercy.

Some German troops who were marching on a campaign took Nicholas prisoner and treated him as a spy.¹ He never lost his patience and tranquility even in such an unpleasant situation. They threatened to hang him, but he responded that he was not what they thought him to be, and in any case, since he was guilty of no crime, he was quite ready to die. And on hearing that, the officers released him.

The Swedes also made an incursion into Lorraine, attacking the little town of Rambervillers as they passed by it. There Nicholas was wounded, and he had to go back to his parents' home to recover.

This adventure caused him to leave the military profession and to undertake a more holy way of life under the banner of Jesus Christ. It was not the vain enthusiasm of an indiscreet devotion that gave him distaste for the military. Rather, it was true piety that caused him to give himself wholly to God and gave him a desire to make amends for his past conduct. The God of all consolation, who had destined him to a more holy life, made him aware of how fleeting the world's vanities are and touched him with the love of heavenly things.

These initial impressions of grace, however, did not achieve their full effect at first. He often went over in his own mind the dangers of the military profession, the vanities and corruptions

¹ French history tells us that peasants or soldiers without arms were frequently employed to carry messages from place to place.

of this life, the instability of men, the betrayals of enemies, and the unfaithfulness of his friends. It was only after keen reflections, after a powerful inner struggle, after tears and sighs, that, conquered finally by the force of God's eternal truths, he made a firm resolve to follow the way of the Gospel. His uncle was a Discalced Carmelite brother, and it was he who made him understand that the air of the world is so contagious that if it does not strike dead all who breathe it, it inevitably alters or corrupts the morals of those who follow its ways.

While meditating on the promises of his baptism, the disorderliness of his youth, the mysteries of the Christian faith, and above all, the passion of Jesus Christ (about which he never thought without being inwardly moved), he was changed into another man. The humility of the cross seemed more beautiful to him than all the glory of the world.

Inflamed with a divine fervor, he searched for God in the simplicity and sincerity of his heart. His only desire was to be alone, so that he might weep for his faults. Since he was old enough not to have to reproach himself for any youthful haste, he thought more than once about withdrawing into solitude, and a favorable opportunity appeared.

There was a certain member of the nobility whom Herman knew whose noble birth and personal merit ought to have provided him with a satisfying life. Yet he was thoroughly dissatisfied with himself, always restless amid his riches. Persuaded that God alone could fulfill his desires, and preferring the poverty of the Gospel to all the treasures of the earth, this gentleman entered a hermitage. His desire was to taste there how sweet the Lord is to those who search for Him with all their heart. Herman,

following his example, entered the hermitage as well. His soul was weary of the toilsome life it was leading and had begun to seek rest. Accompanied by his faithful friend, he retired into the wilderness, where the zeal for Christ within him dispelled his fears, and where he grasped hold of God more than ever.

But although a hermit's life may be excellent for the advanced and mature, it is not usually best for beginners. Herman soon realized this, for the changing emotions of joy, sadness, peace, trouble of spirit, fervor and lack of devotion, confidence and despondency that ruled his soul, made him doubt the correctness of his path. He decided then to seek entrance into a monastic community in order to embrace a type of life whose rules, founded on the firm rock of Jesus Christ and not on the unstable sand of passing feelings,² might strengthen him against the instability of his conduct.

Nevertheless, frightened by the prospect of an unending spiritual battle—and perhaps tempted by the devil—he found himself unable to make this decision immediately. Day by day he was more unresolved. Finally, listening once again to the tender call of God within, he came to Paris to ask permission to enter a religious order. There he became a lay brother among the Discalced Carmelites, taking the name of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection.

From the beginning of his novitiate,³ he applied himself fervently to the practice of the Religious Life. He was most devoted to the Holy Virgin and had a sonlike confidence in her protection.

² Compare Matthew 7:24–27.

³ A novitiate is a trial period, “testing one’s call,” and may last for several years before the first promises or vows can be taken by a prospective brother or sister.

She was his refuge in all the difficulties of his life, in the troubles and the anxieties with which his soul was agitated, and it was his custom to call her his “Good Mother.” He devoted himself particularly to the practice of prayer. However great his duties might be, they never made him lose track of the time set aside in the monastic day for prayer. The presence of God and the love He pours into the soul were his greatest virtues, and they made him in a short time the model for his fellow novices. By the victorious grace of Jesus Christ, he eagerly embraced penance⁴ and sought out the austerities from which nature flees with so much aversion.

Although his superiors assigned Lawrence to the most abject duties, he never let any complaint escape his lips. On the contrary, the grace that refuses to be disheartened by harshness and severity always sustained him in the most unpleasant and annoying assignments. Whatever repugnance he may have felt from his nature, he nevertheless accepted his assignments with pleasure, esteeming himself to be too happy either to suffer or to be humiliated by following the example of the Savior.

The novice-master, sensing his merits and seeing the esteem he acquired by his courageous behavior, felt the need to test the genuineness of his vocation and the steadfastness of his spirit by increasing his difficulties, pressing him by different assignments. Rather than being put down by such experiences, or becoming disheartened by these trials, Lawrence endured them with all the faithfulness one could expect from him.

⁴ *Penance* involves confession of sin to a priest, repentance, and submission to the satisfaction imposed. It can involve voluntary acts of reparation or self-punishment, and is followed by absolution by a priest.

On one occasion, when a brother came to tell him there was talk of sending him away from the monastery, his response was, “I am in the hands of God. He will do with me what may please Him. I do not act out of respect to others. If I do not serve Him here, I will serve Him elsewhere.”

When the time came for him to make his monastic vows, he did not hesitate. I could report here several beautiful actions that would convince the reader of the completeness of his self-sacrifice, but I will pass over them in order to emphasize the interior suffering with which his soul was afflicted. This suffering came about in part by divine Providence, which permitted it in order to purify him, and in part through his lack of experience and his wish to walk his own path in the spiritual life.

As he contemplated the sins of his past life, he was horrified. He became so small and contemptible in his own eyes that he judged himself unworthy of the slightest consolations of God. Yet he saw himself as extraordinarily favored by Him, and in the humility that his own wretchedness produced, he did not dare to accept the heavenly blessings God was offering him. He did not yet know that God is so merciful as to communicate Himself to a sinner such as he knew himself to be. It was then that the fear of illusion began to grip his heart strongly, and his spiritual state appeared so questionable that he no longer knew what would become of him. This doubt caused him such terrible torments that he could only compare them to the torments of hell.

In this trying state he would often go to a quiet place near his cell, where there hung an image of the Savior attached to a column. There, he would pour out his soul before God, entreating

Him not to let him perish, since he was putting all his trust in Him and had no other intention than to please Him.

But no matter what prayer he made to God, his sufferings continued to increase, with such heavy fears and perplexities that his mind was suddenly unable to maintain control. Solitude, which he had regarded as a safe haven, had become a sea agitated with furious storms. His mind was tossed like a vessel beaten by the winds and storm, abandoned by its pilot, and he did not know which way to go or where to flee. On the one hand, he felt a secret inner desire that was leading him to surrender himself to the Lord by a continual sacrifice of himself, and on the other, he was afraid of straying into error—and this caused him innocently to resist God. All these thoughts filled him with horror, and everything seemed hideous to him. His soul was plunged into such bitterness and darkness that he received no consolation from heaven or earth.⁵

This situation, painful though it may be, nonetheless is what God often uses to test His true servants before bestowing on them the inestimable treasures of His wisdom. And this was what He allowed to happen to Brother Lawrence.

One cannot imagine his patience, his sweetness, his moderation, his firmness and his tranquility in all these trials. Since he was so humble in his self-estimation and in his conduct, having only a low image of himself, he truly valued only suffering and humiliations, and asked only for the cup of the Lord, which he was given to drink in all its bitterness.

⁵ Compare this with Bunyan's description of the awakened soul in *Pilgrim's Progress* before Christian stood before the Cross and felt the burden loosen from his back and roll into the deep pit.

It might have pleased God to allow him to retain some of the anointing he had felt at the beginning of his conversion, but that was all removed from him. Ten years of fears and troubles gave him very little release. No pleasure in prayer, no softening in his sufferings: that is what rendered his life so heavy, and reduced him to such extreme neediness of soul that he had become loathsome in his own eyes and could not stand himself. Faith alone was his sole support.

Amid this throng of different thoughts, although reduced to the extreme, he did not lose courage. Rather, in the severest of his sufferings he always had recourse to prayer, to the practice of the presence of God, and to the practice of all the virtues. He endured bodily austerities and long night watches, sometimes spending almost entire nights before the holy Sacrament. Finally, one day before the altar, reflecting on the sufferings with which his soul was afflicted, and knowing that it was for the love of God and for fear of displeasing Him that he was suffering, he firmly resolved to endure them, not only for the rest of his life, but during all eternity, if that were God's will. "For," he said, "it no longer matters to me what I may do, or what I may suffer, provided that I remain lovingly united to His will, which is my only concern."

That was exactly the frame of mind God wanted him to have so He could flood him with His grace. From that moment on, the firmness of his heart increased more than ever; and God, who needs neither time nor human reasoning to make Himself understood, suddenly opened his eyes. Lawrence caught sight of a ray of divine light; illuminating his spirit, this light dissipated all his fear, and his sufferings ceased. The grace he received more than

compensated him for all his past afflictions. Then he felt what the great St. Gregory said, that the world seems very small to a soul who contemplates the grandeur of God. His letters addressed to a Carmelite nun leave no doubt about it, and here is the essence of what they contain:

“The entire world no longer seems to me to be capable of keeping me company. All that I see with the eyes of my flesh passes before me as ghosts and dreams; what I see with the eyes of my soul is what I desire, and to see myself still too far away from it is the cause of my grief and my torment. Dazzled on the one hand by the clearness of this divine Sun of righteousness that dispels the shadows of the night, and on the other, blinded by my miseries, I am often beside myself. However, my most usual occupation is to remain in the presence of God with all the humility of an unprofitable, but nonetheless faithful servant.”

This holy occupation formed his distinguished character, and his habit of keeping himself in such awareness of God became so natural that, as he explains in his letters, he spent the last forty years of his life in the moment-by-moment practice of the presence of God—that is, to use his term, in a silent and intimate conversation with Him.

A religious superior asked him one day what means he had used to acquire the habit of the presence of God, a practice so easy and so continual to him. He replied with his ordinary simplicity: “From the beginning of my entrance into the Religious Life, I regarded God as the Goal and End of all the thoughts and affections of my soul. At the beginning of my novitiate, during the hours assigned to prayer, I spent my time convincing myself of the reality of this Divine Being by the light of faith rather

than by the work of meditation and study. By this short and sure means I advanced in the knowledge of the One with whom I had resolved to remain always.

“So filled as I was with the grandeur of this infinite Being, I went to enclose myself in the place that obedience had marked out for me—which was the kitchen. There, alone, after having made provision for everything connected with my duties, I spent all my remaining time in prayer, both before and after work. At the beginning of my duties, I said to God with a sonlike trust, ‘My God, since You are with me, and since it is Your will that I should apply my mind to these outward things, I pray that You will give me the grace to remain with You and keep company with You. But so that my work may be better, Lord, work with me; receive my work and possess all my affections.’ Finally, during my work, I continued to speak to Him in a familiar way, offering Him my little services, and asking for His grace. At the end of my work, I examined how I had done it, and if I found any good in it, I thanked God. If I noticed errors, I asked His forgiveness for them, and without becoming discouraged, I resolved to change and began anew to remain with God as if I had never strayed. So, by picking myself up after my falls, and by doing many little acts of faith and love, I came to a state in which it would be as difficult for me *not* to think of God as it had been difficult to accustom myself to thinking of Him at the beginning.”

As he experienced the great benefit that this practice brings to the soul, he advised all his friends to apply themselves to it with all the care and faithfulness possible. In order to make them undertake it with firm resolve and courage, he gave them such

strong and effective reasons that he persuaded not only their minds, but penetrated even their hearts and made them love and undertake this holy practice with as much fervor as they had previously regarded it with indifference.

If he had the gift of persuading those who came to him by his words, he had it even more by his good example. One had only to look at him to be edified and to be placed in the presence of God.

He called the practice of the presence of God the shortest and easiest road to Christian perfection, the very form and life of virtue, and the great protection against sin.

He assured his friends that to make this practice easier and to form the habit of it in ourselves, we only need courage and willingness, and he proved this truth even better by his deeds than by his words. For it was seen, when he did his duty as a cook, that in the midst of an arduous task, even in the midst of the most attention-diverting duties, his mind and spirit were fixed on God. Although his duties were great and difficult, when he all alone did the duties that two brothers usually did, he was never seen to act with haste. Rather, with exactness and moderation, he gave each thing the time it required, always maintaining his modest and tranquil manner. He worked neither slowly nor hastily, remaining in constant evenness of mind and in unchanging peace.

He fulfilled his kitchen duties with the greatest love possible for a period of about thirty years, until Providence ordained otherwise. A large ulcer appeared on his leg, obliging his superiors to assign him to an easier office. This change gave him more leisure to adore God in spirit and truth and more time to

occupy himself more totally with His pure presence by the practice of faith and love.

The intimate union with God that resulted from his faithful adoration and his practice of faith and love freed his imagination from its occupation with created things, difficult though this may be, humanly speaking. The powers of hell, though unremitting in their fight with humankind, no longer dared attack Brother Lawrence. His passions became so tranquil that he scarcely ever felt them. If sometimes they stirred up some little emotion to humiliate him, he was like a high mountain that sees storms formed only at its feet.

From that time on, he seemed to have a nature made wholly of virtue; he showed a gentle temperament, complete integrity, and a loving heart. His good physical appearance, his humane and affable air, and his simple, modest manner immediately gained for him the esteem and goodwill of all who saw him. The more often one saw him, the more one discovered in him a rare depth of uprightness and piety.

One of his notable characteristics was that he did not call attention to himself in any way. He always preserved the simplicity of the common life, yet without taking on a melancholy and austere appearance that would only serve to rebuff people. He was not one of those people who never bend, and who regard holiness as incompatible with good manners. Rather, he affected nothing, was sociable with everyone, and always acted in a friendly, forthright manner with his brothers and friends, making no claim of distinction for himself.

Far from presuming on God's graces and making his virtues seen in order to attract admiration to himself, he applied himself unwaveringly to leading a hidden and obscure life. For as the

proud man studies to find all imaginable means to a high place for himself in the minds of others, one who is truly humble uses all his efforts to avoid applause and praise, and tries to discourage such praiseworthy feelings as others might have toward him. There were saints in ancient times who purposely did ridiculous things to draw scorn and mockery to themselves, or at least to inspire doubts about the worthy reputations they had gained. Brother Lawrence, too, made use of such devices. His humility made him feign behavior and adopt certain childish actions in order to hide his virtue and cover its gemlike brilliance. He was not looking for glory from such virtue, but reality, and since he wanted only God to witness his actions, he therefore looked only to Him for his recompense.

Although he was so reserved on his own account, he did not hesitate to communicate his thoughts and feelings with his brothers for their edification—not the more enlightened ones, whose knowledge and reasoning powers often made them proud—but with the lesser and more simple ones. When he found some of that kind, he hid nothing from them. He opened to them with marvelous simplicity the most beautiful secrets of the interior life and the treasures of divine wisdom. The anointing that accompanied his words so strongly moved those who had the advantage of his conversations that they came away full of the love of God, desiring to openly put into action the great truths he had just taught them in private.

Since God led him more by love than by fear of His judgments, all that he said inspired this same love, urging his hearers to break the slightest attachment to the flesh and put to death the old man in order to establish the reign of the new.

“If you wish to make great progress in the life of the spirit,” he used to say to his brothers, “do not pay any attention at all to the beautiful words or the subtle discourses of the worldly wise of the earth. Woe to those who look to the wisdom of men to satisfy their curiosity! It is the Creator who teaches the truth, who instructs the heart of the humble, and makes it understand more in a moment about the mystery of our faith and about God Himself than if it had meditated on them for many years.”

For this reason he carefully avoided replying to anxious questions that lead nowhere, and serve only to trouble the mind and dry up the heart. However, when his superiors required him to say plainly what he thought about some difficult matter being proposed in a conference, he answered so concisely and straight to the point that his answer would silence all reply. That is what several knowledgeable men, priests as well as monks, noticed when they required him to answer them.

That is also the considered reflection of an illustrious French bishop⁶ on a conversation he had with Brother Lawrence. The bishop said that Lawrence had made himself worthy of inwardly hearing God speak to him and of having His mysteries disclosed to him, adding that the greatness and purity of his love for God made him live, even while on earth, like those who enjoy God’s presence in heaven.

He lifted himself up to God by contemplating the Creation, persuaded that books teach few things in comparison with the great book of the world when we know how to study it as we

⁶ The bishop has been identified as Archbishop François Fénelon, who was once tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, heir apparent to the throne of France under Louis XIV.

should. His soul, touched by the diversity of the parts that make up the world, was lifted to God so powerfully that nothing was able to separate it from Him. He remarked how each of the world's different traits display the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the Creator, and how these traits delighted his spirit, filling it with wonder, lifting up his heart with love and joy and making him cry out like the Old Testament prophet, "O Lord, O God of gods! How incomprehensible You are in Your thoughts! How profound in Your designs! How powerful in all Your actions!"

He wrote such lofty and tender things about the grandeur of God, as well as about the inexpressible communication of His love to the soul, that those who saw a few detached sheets from his writings were so charmed and edified by them that they spoke of them with great admiration. He hesitated to lend these sheets and always on condition that they be returned to him at the earliest. This requirement, however, did not prevent a few fragments of them from being collected, and we can only regret that we do not have the others, for if we can judge all that he did by the little that remains to us of his letters and maxims, we have every reason to believe, as he himself declared to one of his friends, that his little writings were nothing more than outpourings of the Holy Spirit and products of His love.

He expressed himself sometimes on paper, but then, comparing what he had just written with what he was experiencing inside, he judged it so inferior and so far removed from the feelings that he had of the grandeur and goodness of God, that he often found himself obliged to tear up the papers immediately. He tore them up even more willingly, because he had written them

only to relieve himself of the fullness of his heart, to give release to his spirit, and to make room in his heart and chest, which were too narrow to contain the divine fire that was devouring him and making him suffer strangely—like a basin that is too small to hold its water and so lets it overflow, or like an underground place that cannot stop the violence of the fire in it, and so is forced to give it an outlet.

Faith was one of the principal virtues in which Brother Lawrence excelled. As the righteous live by faith, so faith was the life and nourishment of his spirit. It gave such growth to his soul that he made great and visible progress in the interior life. It was faith that had made him put the entire world under his feet, and made him scorn it and consider it unworthy of the slightest place in his heart. Faith led him to God, elevating Him above all created things, and making him search for happiness in possessing God alone. Faith was his great schoolmistress; and faith alone taught him more than reading all the books in the world could possibly do.

It was faith that gave him his high esteem for God and his great veneration of the sacred mysteries, especially for the most Holy Sacrament of Communion, where the Son of God dwells as a King. He was so lovingly attracted to the Blessed Sacrament that he spent many hours before it, day and night, offering homage and adoration to God. This same faith gave him a profound respect for the Word of God, for the Church and its holy ordinances, and for his superiors, whom he obeyed as representatives of Jesus Christ. Finally, he believed with such certainty the truths of faith, that he often said, “All the beautiful speeches that I hear made about God, what I can read myself

about Him, or even what I can feel—none of this could satisfy me. For since He is infinitely perfect, God is consequently inexpressible, and there are no terms with enough energy to give me a perfect idea of His greatness. It is faith that discloses Him to me and makes me know Him as He is. I learn more in this way, in a short time, than I would learn in several years of schooling.”

Crying out, he used to say, “O faith! O faith! O admirable virtue that illuminates the spirit of man and leads him to the personal knowledge of his Creator! O amiable virtue, how little known you are, and even less practiced, although your knowledge is so glorious and so spiritually beneficial!”

From this living faith were born his firm hope in the goodness of God, his sonlike trust in God’s providence, and his total and complete abandonment into God’s hands, without causing him any worry about what would happen to him after death. He was not content, during the greatest part of his life, simply to rest his salvation passively on the power of God’s grace and the merits of Jesus Christ; rather, forgetting himself and all his self-interests, he actively thrust himself headlong into the arms of Infinite Mercy. The more desperate things seemed, the more he hoped. He was like a large rock, beaten by the waves of the sea, which becomes stronger in the midst of a storm. This is what we have already observed in our mention of his interior sufferings shortly after his entrance into the monastic life.

If, as St. Augustine says, the extent of our hope is the measure of how much grace we receive, what can we say about the hope that God imparted to Brother Lawrence, who, as the Scripture says, hoped against hope? This is why he used to say that the

greatest glory we could give God is to totally mistrust our own strength and place our trust completely in His protection. This is the way to sincerely acknowledge our own weakness and recognize the omnipotence of the Creator.

Since love is the queen and foundation of all virtues, imparting to all the rest their true worth and value, it is not surprising that Brother Lawrence's virtues were so nearly perfect, since the love of God reigned so perfectly in his heart. He had turned all his affections toward this Divine Object, as St. Bernard says. If faith made him regard God as the sovereign Truth, if hope made him envisage Him as his final End and perfect happiness, love made him regard the Lord as the most perfect of all beings, or more precisely, as Perfection itself.

Far from loving God for his own selfish ends, his charity was so unbiased that he would have loved God even if there were no suffering to avoid or recompense to anticipate, wanting only the good and glory of God and deriving all his joy from accomplishing His holy will (as we shall see in his final illness, when he had a spirit so free until his last breath, that he explained the feelings of his heart as if he were in perfect health).

The purity of his love was so great that he wished, had it been possible, that God had not seen the actions he was doing for Him, so that he could do them solely for His glory and without any return upon himself. He complained lovingly, however, and used to say to his friends that God did not let any of his actions pass without immediately rewarding them a hundredfold, often giving him such great feelings of His divinity that he was sometimes overwhelmed by them. He used to say, with his customary respect and familiarity, "It is too much, Lord! It is too