



Presence Prayer

BROTHER LAWRENCE'S SANCTUARY ON THE SPOT

Presence prayer is choosing to believe in and concentrate on God's continual attention towards us in order to increase our awareness of and dependence upon his very personal presence.

The purpose of presence prayer is both to position ourselves toward God and to become aware of his voice calling to us throughout the day, so that we increasingly note a “sense of cooperation with God in little things.”¹ Like all prayer, this exercise is often characterized by seasons of deep discovery and diligent discipline. For Nicholas Herman the practice took ten years to translate from intentional choice to spontaneous habit, but the work satisfied him more than any other spiritual endeavor.

Nicholas Herman was born to a poor family of Lorraine, France, in 1611. He received no formal education and served first as a soldier and then as a household servant. In 1666, he joined a Carmelite order in Paris as a lay brother and remained there until he died in 1691. We know him as Brother Lawrence.

The one thing Brother Lawrence wanted more than anything else was to “belong entirely to God”² (1 Thess 5:23). He writes that throughout his service, he learned many different spiritual practices for “going to God,” but found these confusing. Instead, he attempted to experience the presence of God in the midst of the mundane chores of daily life. Each day he would fix the thought of Christ in his mind before he rose, and he would pray as his last act before he fell asleep. Throughout the day, he sought to return continuously to Christ, so that everything he did was guided by and given to the Spirit.

For ten years he battled straying thoughts, trying to shift the habit from a repetitive discipline of inviting Christ's presence to an involuntary act of the heart. In his letters, he describes wrestling against a wandering mind, trying not to dwell on his lapses or become discouraged. In one letter, he explained, “When I no longer thought that I would do anything other than finish my days in these troubles and anxieties, . . . I found myself suddenly changed, and my soul, which until then had always been troubled, felt a sense of deep inner peace.”³

Brother Lawrence remained a kitchen servant all his life, referring to himself as the “lord of all pots and pans,”⁴ but in his mind, no task was too trivial for God's company. This custom of minute-by-minute prayer is encapsulated in his famous quote: “The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the

¹ Frank C. Laubach, *Letters by a Modern Mystic* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1937; repr. 1958), 14.

² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (rev. ed.; ed. Hal M. Helms; trans. Robert J. Edmonson; Orleans, Mass.: Paraclete, 1985), 109.

³ *Ibid.*, 110, 93.

⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 124.

same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament”⁵ (Ps 139:7).

Some of us are drawn instinctively to the tranquility that a life of thought implies, soaking in every possible “way to God” like sponges. We crave the contemplative lifestyle of Brother Lawrence’s monastery, but like him we may not have the luxury of permanent retreat. We, too, must engage daily in some sort of business. We, too, must cope with noise and clatter. Practicing God’s presence grants us sanctuary in whatever situation we find ourselves. Instead of storing up methods for getting to God, we are able to get God himself and to pass his peace along to others.

This sense of sanctuary also benefits those of us who are immediate, action-oriented responders (Ps 27:4). In Brother Lawrence’s exercise, our perspectives are stretched. We learn to retreat from “living large” under our own power, so we can reinvest in living within the fullness of God (John 10:10). Rather than being driven by instinct, our deeds are born in the vulnerability of abiding with the Spirit. We act with steady intention, instead of simply reacting to the challenges around us. And when we receive God’s mercy through submission to him, we are able to grant his mercy to others (Matt 10:8).

In his letters, Brother Lawrence expressed reticence about instructing others in his practice. Thankfully one of the followers of this path, Frank Laubach (1884–1970), left diary entries that break down some steps to begin this lifelong discipline of awareness. Laubach, a missionary to the Philippines, notes that on the face of it, this experiment in prayer may strike one as too intense, too internally focused, or too impossible to coordinate with the myriad tasks and conversations that must be accomplished in a day.⁶ “Do not try it,” he warns, “unless you feel dissatisfied with your own relationship with God.”⁷

Practice

1. First resolve just to start and finish each day as Brother Lawrence did, by inviting the Lord to rule your day as you think about it before you rise and by offering him the results at the end of the day before you fall asleep. Do not wait until you have mastered this habit, but set yourself a goal of several days or weeks during which you will simply invoke the Lord’s presence, asking him to speak, before waking fully and before sleeping fully.
2. When you reach your mark, note any ways in which your awareness, your daily life, or anything else has changed. You may consider more practice of the same or may feel it is time to move further into the discipline.
3. Choose something regular in your day that you will use as a prompt. Perhaps it will be the sight of your favorite color, the quarter hour chime of a clock, or a daily chore such as walking the dog. Whenever your prompt appears (or sounds), pause to invite the Lord into your actions, your words, your thoughts, your emotions. Every few weeks, you may need to change your prompt to stir the

⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1958), 9.

⁶ Laubach, *Letters*, 11, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

practice, so that you do not become mired in habituation and miss the Lord. Think of these pauses as checking out to rest for a moment in the “chapel of your heart.”⁸ Perhaps you will imagine Jesus with you in your sanctuary.

4. Regularly note the impact that these rest-stops have in your ordinary life. How is the Lord present? Do you feel like you are cooperating with God in the little things? Have you begun to miss God if you wait too long to take a break with him? Do you find the practice arduous? Have other conversations or tasks changed as you seek God regularly?⁹ Discuss these with a friend in the journey. Perhaps you will journal once a week so that you may revisit your notes in times of discouragement.

5. You may wish to play the game of minutes,¹⁰ where you try to see how many minutes in a day you can be aware of God’s presence.

6. Perhaps you will pick one hour each day to continuously cooperate with God, even in the littlest tasks. Ask him what he thinks while making each decision, tightening every bolt, reading every paragraph, etc. Enjoy the perfection of that hour with him. Initially, such a goal might seem unrealistic. Laubach laments, “If one thinks of God all the time, he will never get anything else done.” But he reminds himself (and us) that “concentration is merely the continuous return to the same problem from a million angles. We do not think of one thing. We always think of the relationship of at least two things, and more often of three or more things simultaneously. So my problem is this: Can I bring God back in my mind-flow every few seconds so that God shall always be in my mind as an after image, shall always be one of the elements in every concept and precept?”¹¹

7. Eventually you may invite the Lord into everything, all day long, no matter how trivial, from riding the subway in a rush-hour crowd to answering customers’ calls on the phone. This may be the most difficult step in concentrating on the Lord because other people’s conversations and expressions distract you from your goal of hearing God. If this is the case, pray inwardly for the people you encounter, not an elaborate supplication, but a small shift of awareness, whatever reasonably allows you to remain present to that person and the business at hand. It will become easier as you turn the practice into a habit and feel a new depth and richness within the people around you.¹² Finally, consider receiving interruptions to your plans as God’s plan instead. See them as God’s indicator to stop and listen to him.¹³

⁸ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1977), 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 126.

¹¹ Laubach, *Letters*, 19–20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 58–59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

8. This exercise is called “practicing the presence of God” for a reason. It takes practice. Laubach began in a lonesome time of life and in the quiet times of the day and expanded to include interactions with people. He started by checking out of activity and in with God and then grew the exercise into a continuous habit. Talking about God with others, rather than only thinking about him, helped him stay on track. Initially, he sought God in one particular room of the house and eventually discovered that he longed to be in that room and got his best work done there because he associated it with God. When he practiced God’s presence, he addressed God in the second person (“you”) instead of concentrating on the abstract concept of deity. He tried to feel as though God was “just behind everything . . . just under my hand, just under the typewriter, just behind this desk, just inside the file, just inside the camera.”¹⁴ He even allowed God to talk back in his “inner life” by loosening control over his own tongue or fingers on the keyboard and noticing how the ensuing ramble or poetry spoke to him.¹⁵

9. Laubach noted that he hardly ever felt as though he had succeeded in being with God for a whole day. On the other hand, he asked, “Does the effort help?” And answered, “Tremendously. Nothing I have ever found proves such a tonic to the mind and body.” He acknowledged that forcing the experiment to the point of strain provided no success or relief.¹⁶ Instead, he realized that he could let go of his perceived failures and begin again with a clean slate at any instant (Phil 3:13–14). The possibility of a fresh start encouraged him to keep going. There may be times when you also feel too spiritually weary to sustain awareness of the divine with so much vigilance. Maybe during such a season, it would be better to tell the Lord you need a break and to trust in his compassionate understanding. After all, our Creator knows that “we are dust” (Ps 103:14). Legalism does neither the Lord, nor you, any favors.

10. The goal is communion with and deference to God. In the beginning, the outward discipline takes much practice. It may seem artificial. Eventually such prayer becomes involuntary. Instead of “checking out” of what we are doing to “check in” with God, we become as conscious of him as we are of other people in the room, even if he is not the focus of our conversation. The invocation enters our dreams and quiets our actions (Ps 3:5). There is a point, or several points, when we cease striving (Ps 37:7). Our thoughts and emotions shape themselves around the awareness of Christ’s presence. Living in prayer enters our rhythm so entirely that rooting it out would be like trying not to breathe. This is preparation for heaven and our eternal communion with the Trinity.

Sample the Prayer

Practicing the presence of God is uniquely designed to be sampled for only a few minutes each day or once a week. Steps 1, 3, 5, and 6 above can be increased or decreased to suit the time and energy you have. If even these seem too prohibitive a goal, choose the shower as your selected space (step 8). As you scrub, consider pausing to turn your thoughts to God and resting with him for an

¹⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

extra moment. The advantage of the shower is that most of the usual intrusions will not interrupt you there.

Practice Together

As both Brother Lawrence and Frank Laubach note, it is no easy task to maintain the level of awareness of God that they advocate. For some of us, maintaining that degree of awareness of the people in a small room is difficult enough. Sharing the practice of the presence of God with a spiritual friend or group can be a tremendous encouragement on a day-to-day or week-by-week level.

Knowing that someone else is trying to seek God in the same way you are will prompt you not to give up when you become discouraged and will provide a sympathetic ear when you need to talk about your struggles. Often, when you feel stuck in your own practice, someone else in your group will be able to see your need from a different angle and suggest ideas that you would not have thought of on your own. Regularly reporting on one another's progress, sharing victories, praying for each other's successes, and picking each other up when you stumble, helps maintain momentum and renew joy in the practice.

Furthermore, if your fellow practitioners join you in other activities—shopping, apple-picking, painting the house, going to movies—then you will have opportunities to share the practice itself, rather than simply reporting on it to one another. For example, you might choose a prompt such as announcements from the public address system during an afternoon at the mall (step 3) or play the game of minutes together over dinner (step 5). Take care not to trivialize your references to or rest stops with God, but with intention join in turning to him. Eventually you will notice that God makes his way into your conversations and your silences much more organically.

Deepening your connection with God will work in reverse to deepen your connections with those brothers and sisters who share your practice of the presence. The relationships will feed each other over time so that the energy you have expended to maintain ties with God will witness against easily letting go of the ties with one another—in spite of changes in your work, family structure, geographic location, and health. This, too, is a foretaste of the communion we will enjoy in heaven.

Consider

1. When you consider God's investment in the minutia of your life, how do you characterize his involvement? Do you think God "cares" which city you move to, much less what you cook for your dinner? According to Matthew 10:29–31, God notices and values every hair falling from your head. How does this assertion compare with your assumptions about his involvement? How does it shape how you view presence prayer?
2. How do you usually evaluate your prayer life? What are the benefits to developing a sense of God's presence by regularly observing your prayer habit?

3. When you compare Brother Lawrence’s circumstances and experience of prayer with your own, how practical does his plan sound to you? What do you feel about a ten-year commitment to praying like this? What might motivate you to practice the presence of God in spite of its demands?
4. What are some regular events, chores, visual stimuli, or auditory signals that might function as prompts for you to check in with Jesus? Where in your day do you have the alone-time that might be most conducive to beginning such a plan?
5. What obstacles to this discipline can you envision? How might you overcome them? What plan can you make with your spiritual friend or group to receive help and encouragement when you encounter weariness, defeat, or the temptation to give up?

Study Further

“Brother Lawrence: An Habitual Sense of God’s Presence.” Pages 369–375 in *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups, revised and expanded*. Edited by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

Brother Lawrence. *The Practice of the Presence of God, Revised Edition*. Translated by Robert J. Edmonson. Edited by Hal M. Helms. Orleans, Mass.: Paraclete, 1985.

Foster, Richard J. “Unceasing Prayer.” Pages 124–27 in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

“Frank Laubach: Opening Windows to God.” Pages 101–107 in *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups, revised and expanded*. Edited by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

Laubach, Frank C. *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. Syracuse, NY: New Reader’s, 1955.

Wolpert, Daniel. “Journaling: Writing What God Shows Us.” Pages 101–112 and 183–84 in *Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices*. Nashville, Tenn.: Upper Room, 2003.

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