



DHM
Divine Healing
MINISTRIES

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

*For those seeking peace, strength, healing, refreshment and renewal
through a closer walk with God*

By Brother David Jardine

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

It sometimes comes as a surprise to people when I tell them that in the Society of St Francis we spend three hours each day in prayer and worship. It's an even bigger surprise when I say that this is not nearly enough for me. If I take my mind off God as soon as I leave the chapel I am much more likely to say or do something that I regret. It's essential that I keep in touch with God as much as possible throughout the day if I am going to be the person He wants me to be. The advice of Brother Lawrence has really helped me to maintain that contact.

He was a monk in a monastery in France who in 1691 was persuaded to write down the principles by which he lived. They have come to be known as the '*The Practice of the Presence of God*'. For four years before he began to pray in this way Lawrence went through serious inner turmoil. Eventually, probably out of a sense of his own deep need, he made a complete surrender of his whole life to God. He vowed that from that moment he would keep in

touch with God from he got up in the morning until he went to bed at night.

It took some time to really develop this way of praying. At first his mind wandered a great deal. But practice made perfect and Lawrence soon came to the point where he was able to keep in constant contact with God throughout the day. Although he worked in the kitchen for much of his time in the monastery he said that, through his continuous communion with God, the inner turmoil disappeared and life became very easy. He claimed to feel just as close to God washing pots and pans in the kitchen as he did when he was in the chapel receiving communion.

In Lawrence's book certain principles emerge very clearly. I would like to discuss those now and also share some of my own experiences in, rather imperfectly, practising the presence of God

Surrender

Before he began this particular way of praying Lawrence surrendered his life entirely to God. He felt that this was an essential step to take, and he returns to this theme time and time again in the short book. I cannot emphasise how important it is for us to follow Lawrence's example, to surrender as much of ourselves as we can, even if we feel that our offering is somewhat inadequate.

This is not a once-for-all commitment. In my experience it is something that has to be renewed and worked out many times each day. Lawrence said that we must give ourselves utterly to God in self-abandonment and find contentment in doing His will, whether He takes us through suffering or consolations. Although he was happy working in the kitchen he was ready to lay aside any area of work if he was asked. He often brought it to mind that our sole purpose in life is to please God and, in the pursuit of this, began to live for God as if there were only the two of them in the world.

He also tells us that in sickness and pain we must keep repeating our self-surrender; and in our worst pain ask Him humbly and lovingly, like a child his good father, for resignation to His holy will and the help of His grace. Indeed, Lawrence felt that sometimes the Lord allows us to go through afflictions in order to have us completely submitted to Him. Without this submission of heart and spirit to the will of God, he says, devotion and perfection cannot exist.

I understand what Lawrence is saying here. If life had always been smooth for me I doubt if I would have made the same effort to surrender myself to God. We may not like difficulties and suffering, but they can push us to submit entirely to God in a way that nothing else will. I know a woman in her seventies who says she has reached the stage of giving thanks for her sufferings because without them, she would not have the close relationship with God that she enjoys today.

Lawrence eventually reached the stage where he forgot himself totally. He abandoned all for God and did everything for Him. The love of God's will in his life had taken the place normally reserved

for our own will. In all that happened to him he would see the plan of God, and this kept him in unbroken peace. The natural attachment which people have for their country did not concern him. Maybe in Northern Ireland we could learn something here. Often we have given to our country an allegiance due only to God.

I think that these few references to what Lawrence said demonstrate well the depth of this surrender. What we have to ask now is how, in practical terms, can these principles be worked out today? We must begin by taking a little time to surrender our whole lives to God. Even if we have been committed Christians for many years, if we really want to practise the presence of God, we should pick a time when we renew that total commitment. Then that has to be worked out in everyday life.

When I wake in the morning I try to turn my mind immediately to God – *“Lord, I want to give this new day to You, I want to live it for You, to glorify You, to worship You, to surrender this day to You”*. Then I go out and try to live in that spirit. That will involve

many acts of surrender during the day. I make a telephone call, and as I wait for the phone to be picked up, I surrender the call to God – how I will relate to the person, the words I speak, any decisions I may be asking the person to make: I simply let go and submit the call completely to God.

The same principle is applied with letters – I ask for God’s blessing on the one to whom I am writing, that the letter will be helpful to them, that they will be able to respond generously. If I am going to meet someone I surrender that encounter to God – that we will relate well together: even if there has been some tension in the relationship in the past I ask for God’s blessing upon them, and that on this occasion we will get on well together. As I drive the car I ask God to give me the grace to drive for Him, to protect me and help me to be considerate toward other drivers. In short, I welcome God into every area of my life, and assure Him that, however small the task, I am doing it for Him.

From time to time I tell the Lord that I want to glorify Him in everything, or in something specific that I am just about to do. The Presbyterian Catechism asks the question,

Q *‘What is man’s chief end?’*

A *‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.’*

If we were to ask that question today, we would put it differently:-

Q *‘What is our purpose in life?’*

A *‘Our purpose in life is to glorify God...’*

We are on safe ground telling the Lord many times a day that what we are doing, we are doing to His glory.

Finally, in the whole area of surrender, learning to let go of anxieties, concerns, annoyances and apparent failures is very important. So often we want to change circumstances, and even people, which do not suit us. It is a deeper stage on the spiritual journey when we learn to accept and let go. Then we can discover that there is peace in surrender.

Conversing with God

Lawrence made a commitment that during all of his working hours, right throughout the whole day, he would converse with God. Other people would not be aware of what he was doing, but within himself he was maintaining this continuous conversation. He said that “*we should fix ourselves firmly in the presence of God by conversing all the time with Him. A shameful course it would be to abandon His fellowship to give thought to trifles*”. At the beginning this was not easy for Lawrence. His mind tended to wander; when that happened he did not become annoyed, but gently brought his attention back to focus on God again. He emphasises the need for discipline and perseverance, and I agree with that. My experience has been that, if we allow it, the mind will wander wherever it wishes. It is very important that we move quickly to correct wrong thoughts. If we start to think negatively about someone those thoughts can carry on and on. We need to find a way to arrest that process as soon as we become aware of what is happening—by

asking God to give us a love for the person, by showering blessings upon them or even praising God for them. As Lawrence says, wrong thoughts must be set aside as quickly as possible so that we can begin again our conversation with God.

Even when we are finding it difficult to practise the presence

Lawrence encourages us to keep going and, little by little, to turn our minds to God. He says that at table and in the midst of conversation we should lift our heart at times towards Him.

Praying silently for those around us or those to whom we are talking is one way of doing this. It simply means lifting the person to God and asking Him to touch them and help them. We don't have to be doing it continuously, just from time to time during the course of the conversation.

This quiet prayer for other people also helps to prevent me from becoming self-centred and inward-looking. In the living of the Christian life the focus of our gaze ought to be outwards—toward

God, other people, the beauties of nature. The gift of praise has always encouraged me to keep my mind focused in this direction.

Many times each day, especially when he had a few free moments, Lawrence turned to praise God, sometimes even prostrating himself on the ground. When he was very ill and near the point of death someone asked him what he was thinking about. He said he was simply blessing God, praising, worshipping and loving Him with all his heart.

I have always found that praise is one of the best remedies for anxiety. It helps us to turn our mind away from ourselves and onto God. It also allows us to express gratitude for so many things that we normally take for granted.

These may enrich our lives in all sorts of ways, but often we don't even notice them, unless we make the effort. Praise allows us to tell Jesus how much we appreciate Him. Praise keeps us in touch with

God and, because of this, is a wonderful way of dealing with distractions.

I have found that watching television, or even reading newspapers, is an opportunity to welcome God into situations which need His help, and where possibly great suffering is taking place. This does require an effort. Television is relaxing and needs less concentration than the radio. As we watch, we need to keep part of our mind focused on God so that we will be able to welcome Him into situations as they arise. TV also gives us an opportunity to pray for individual people, many of them in public life, and to shower God's blessing upon them, whether we like them or find them difficult. It is better to pray than to criticise or become angry or despondent. A friend of mine said, *'pray about everything and worry about nothing'*.

One way to do this is to turn thoughts into prayers. Sometimes a person comes to mind, maybe unexpectedly. That is an opportunity to lift them before God: *"Lord, I bring Jimmy to You and ask You*

to touch him wherever he is at this moment". It only takes a few seconds. We can pray like this anywhere and if enough people do it, it will bring untold good.

A few years ago, before the IRA ceasefire in Northern Ireland, I spent some time each day in the city of Belfast praying on the move. The security forces had warned that terrorists were trying to plant a massive bomb in the city centre before Christmas. I decided to pray.

Each day for an hour I started at Belfast Cathedral and walked a four mile radius round the city, praying all the way. I prayed for the protection of buildings, and for people, for members of the security forces, for newspapers offices, television stations, the City Hall. I surrounded in prayer everywhere I passed. The massive bomb which we had been warned about never arrived. Any time that I have talked publicly about praying on the move it seems to catch the imagination of people.

We can pray in this way walking or driving or sitting in a bus. Those whom we meet will not know what is taking place, but we will be quietly lifting up to God all the people, buildings, homes and situations that we pass. What an amazing effect it would have on the atmosphere if a percentage of people in any town or city were to pray like this while they are on the move.

Finally, in this section on conversing with God, we want to give thanks that He is always available, always with us, that He is only a prayer away. I once heard a woman say in a meeting that you never need an appointment to meet God, you never have to queue up, and you never get the engaged tone when you ring Him on the telephone. He's always available. Many times each day we need to thank Him that He is faithful to the promises:-

'I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Be strong and of good courage, be not afraid,

For I the Lord your God am with you wherever you go'.

Isn't it exciting to know that wherever we go God is right there with us?

For the love of God and by the grace of God

Brother Lawrence said that he was always ruled by love, with no other interest. Everything that he did he wanted to do for the love of God. Even if he was only picking up a straw from the ground he wanted to do it for God. Whether he was in the kitchen or the cobbler's shop this was always his motivation, and he prayed at every juncture for the grace to do his work.

All we have to do, he said, *'is love and be happy in God'*. We must not grow weary in doing little things for the love of God, who looks not to the greatness of the deed but to the love. Some failure at the start should not dismay us. Habit comes finally, and that produces the action without thinking about it, and with wondrous joy.

Lawrence's own life is a testimony to the truth of this statement. Because of his faithfulness in abiding in God's presence he was

within himself a very happy man: and even though he spent his whole life in the monastery, usually working at relatively menial tasks, his testimony is still an inspiration to people three centuries later.

It is obvious that Lawrence is absolutely right in focusing on love. That is what the Christian life is all about. Yet it is not always easy to practise. Not everyone whom we meet or work with or live with is easy to love. Lawrence's answer to difficulties in this area would have been to ask God for the grace to love. He did not try to live life in his own strength, but at every juncture drew on the grace of God.

I have seen in my own experience how effective this can be. In January, 1999 I was part of a team which went on a three week mission to the Hyderabad area of India. We met together on a few occasions before the trip to plan and pray.

One evening the wife of one of the team members, who was not actually going herself, prayed that God would give to every member

of the team a great love for the people of India. I thought it was a wonderful prayer and should be used by all of us many times each day to deepen our love for individuals, groups,

racess and nations. Lawrence did not try to follow Jesus in his own strength, and neither should we. The grace of God is always available, only a prayer away. This is a theme that Lawrence returns to time and time again, showing how important he felt it to be. The higher the perfection we aspire to, he said, the more we will need God's grace.

This is particularly important when we are tackling something very difficult, like a sin that keeps defeating us. My experience has been that in cases like this we need to pray and pray and pray, maybe many times each day asking for God's grace to gain the victory. And He will give us the victory; but we have to pray without ceasing, possibly for weeks, months, or years, so that that sin does not bounce back and defeat us once more. We will know ourselves, possibly through the experience of failure, how much we need to

pray. What is beyond question is that the amount of grace we need is always available. *‘My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness’.*

I feel that in this whole area we need to ask God to change our wills. *‘Lord, give us the will to follow You wherever You lead, to overcome temptation, to forgive, to love our enemies, or whatever the challenge may be’.* Especially if pleasure is involved in the sin it is essential to ask God to give us the will to change. When our resolve and intention are strengthened it is a great help.

We have already alluded to the fact that practising the presence of God is not always easy, especially at the beginning. It requires discipline and perseverance. Maybe we’ll have to ask God to help us with this. One thing is certain—He will respond generously to that request because He wants constant

communion with His people. But it is possible that we will have to ask and ask and ask, not for His sake but for ours, until practice makes perfect.

The same is true about physical weakness. This may have come about through injury, recovery from illness, stress or the results of ongoing sickness. Whatever the cause we know Gods promise is that they who wait for the Lord will renew their strength.

Agnes Sanford, one of those responsible for bringing the ministry of divine healing back into the institutional Churches of the United States in the 40's and 50's, tells of a woman whom she prayed for suffering from a painful and '*incurable*' illness. The woman felt prompted by God to get out of bed and start to work. The effort of getting out of bed, putting on clothes and going downstairs, was immense.

The secret was that she did not try to do it in her own strength. Every step that she took she drew on the grace of God. After fifteen

minutes of agonising effort she managed to reach the kitchen and, sitting on a stool before the sink, began to peel potatoes, *‘I am peeling this potato in the strength of Almighty God,’* she would tell herself, struggling against weakness. *‘I can’t exhaust His strength, because He is inexhaustible. So I will certainly and surely get this potato peeled, and for that, oh Lord, I do thank you.’*

Then she rested, and peeled another potato, drawing all the time on the strength of God. Eventually she was able to make the beds and clean the house, and go out to visit others. If she had interpreted *‘my grace is sufficient for you’* as meaning that she would never recover from her illness, but would have the grace to bear it, then she never would have been better.

Instead, the woman assumed that God’s strength was available for healing, step by step, minute by minute, hour by hour. That is why she recovered. And the good news is that the grace and power which she drew on are available to each one of us as well in times of physical weakness, sickness or discouragement. *‘Don’t try to do*

it in your own strength, draw on the grace of God', was Lawrence's motto, 'and whatever you are doing, whether small or big, do everything for the love of God'.

FURTHER INSIGHTS

Don't need to do more

Lawrence is not suggesting that we increase the bulk of our activity. Our sanctification does not depend upon some alteration in what we do, but in doing for God what we commonly do for ourselves. This is why it is so important to keep surrendering everything to God in an ongoing way.

Falling short

Lawrence did emphasise that we have to examine ourselves to find those virtues of which we are most in need, and the sins of which we are most guilty, and turn to God in confidence that He will help us.

When he fell short he did not become angry with himself, he simply brought it to the Lord and put it right with Him. After that he concerned himself no more over his fault. We would do well to follow his example.

Lawrence also treated himself gently when his mind wandered. On becoming aware of what had happened he did not get angry or annoyed. Very patiently he brought his mind back to God again, and carried on practising the presence.

Glorifying God

Brother Lawrence and Billy Graham lived three centuries apart. From different countries and different traditions both of them in their own way were great Christian men. And the aim of everything they did was the same—to glorify God. Lawrence encourages us to look always to God and His glory. So does Billy. On an occasion when he had conducted a particularly successful mission the organisers were absolutely delighted, and were saying so publicly.

As they spoke Billy was praying within himself, *'Lord, all of the glory to You, all of the glory to You'*.

That is a good prayer for all of us to pray, not just when we are receiving a compliment publicly, but in everything we do.

Reading the Bible

Lawrence preferred the Gospels to all the other books of the bible. That was because they included the life and words of Jesus. Most of us will probably share that preference with Lawrence, but it is worth mentioning that the Psalms are also particularly inspiring for devotional reading. In the whole area of practising the presence of God, regular reading of scripture really helps to keep us in touch.

The English Pentecostal minister Smith Wigglesworth was particularly good at this. Every fifteen minutes he opened up the bible and read a few verses. Before meals and between each course he read and prayed again. Last thing at night and upon waking in

the morning he would fill his mind with some more verses of scripture. Smith Wigglesworth was a unique character both in his devotional life and in how he performed his ministry. Our way does not have to be his way. Nevertheless, I feel that he has much to teach us about keeping in touch and practising the presence.

Listening to God

For most of my Christian life listening to God did not feature high on the agenda. I probably did not realise how important it is, and I wasn't very good at it anyway. But in 1982 all of that changed. Without specifically seeking this gift, in response to prayer and fasting, God gave me an ability to listen and hear that I had never had before. My ministry was radically transformed. Up to that point I had generally thought up good ideas, and then put those into practice. Now I switched tactics. Instead of spending time thinking up good ideas I began to listen to hear what God's good ideas were—and then I put those into practice.

His ideas, I have found, are far more effective than anything I could think up. There has also been a great blessing upon my personal life. It used to be that I could only hear God speak when He was making great demands upon me, such as the call to the priesthood or to the Society of St Francis. On those occasions He shouted so loudly that I could not avoid hearing Him. But now, when I took time to listen, it was different. God seemed to want to reassure me, tell me that He loved me, speak words of strength and peace, and give me guidance in my life and ministry. The relationship was transformed. Up until then I had always been able to speak to God, but now the way was much more open for Him to speak to me.

In his writings Brother Lawrence does not dwell much on listening to God. I am sure that he did listen, and was good at it.

He just does not write much about it. Yet I feel it is important to mention here because if we want to practise the presence of God and keep in touch throughout the day we do need to talk, but we also need to listen, and for anyone who finds that difficult, but

would like to be able to listen I say *‘ask God to give you this gift, and keep on asking until you receive it’*. After all, Jesus did say *‘Ask and you will receive’*. He could not have put it any simpler.

Results of practising the presence

Lawrence was absolutely right when he said that practising the presence of God does require effort, discipline and perseverance, especially at the beginning. Surrendering our lives completely on an ongoing basis does not come naturally. Neither is it easy to keep focused on God throughout the whole day. That has certainly been my experience. Yet when I am making the effort to relate to God in this way I find that within me there is a deeper peace and spirit of relaxation. This is often reflected by being able, in discussion, to speak calmly on contentious issues.

Keeping in touch with God also gives me greater confidence in my relationship with Him, which helps when I have to speak or pray in public. Lawrence’s emphasis on drawing on the grace of God, and the constant availability of that grace, has given me a new strength

in overcoming sin in my life, but I do acknowledge that it means I often have to pray and pray and pray. Finally, knowing that our purpose in life is to glorify God and to do everything for love of Him gives a clear direction to aim at in all we say, think or do.

Our constant companion

Practising the presence of God means that we always have a constant companion with us wherever we go. There have been times in my life when a deeper awareness of that would have been very helpful. During the 80's I spent three years in New York, in Brooklyn, in a very dangerous part of the borough where the crime rate was the highest in the whole of New York City. What was most dangerous was being on the streets, especially travelling far outside my own area, which I had to do almost every day. My problem was that I was almost always on my own, a lone white face in areas where racial feelings ran high, in a city where 3,000 people were killed every year. I often felt very vulnerable, and frightened.

After I left New York in 1988 I went back almost every year to conduct a healing mission. I always had colleagues with me, so when I walked the streets and travelled the subway I was never alone. That gave me a much greater sense of confidence and safety.

Is that what practising the presence of God does for us? It allows

us to know that we are never alone, our constant companion is always with us. Assured of His presence we too can have confidence, safety and peace as well as all the strength we need and a clear direction for our lives.

This pamphlet goes out with my prayer that God will give you the desire and the grace to practise His Presence and enjoy His Company wherever you go.

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