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Book Review: *The Practice of the Presence of God and Elected Silence*

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MS. ROBYN WRIGLEY-CARR
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BY
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

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SP458R – Assignment #3 – Book Review

Book Review: *The Practice of the Presence of God* and *Elected Silence*

*The Practice of the Presence of God*¹ by Brother Lawrence consists of a preface, four remembered conversations, fifteen letters, a series of spiritual maxims, and a short biography of Brother Lawrence by Abbé Joseph de Beaufort² entitled “The Character of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection”. The one grand thesis is constant devotion to God through unceasing prayer – that is, practicing the awareness of God’s presence until the awareness becomes habit.³

*Elected Silence*⁴ (originally appearing under the title *The Seven Storey Mountain*) by Thomas Merton is an autobiography of faith development – the story from his birth in 1915 until his vow-taking at a Trappist monastery in 1944.

This book review examines five themes – grace, conversion, prayer, presence (of God), and relevance (for today) – in relation to both works.

¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God: The Best Rule of Holy Life* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004). This edition, used for this book review, was obtained through the Bishop David L. Walker Library at the Caroline Chisholm Centre (P.O. Box 340, Pennant Hills, NSW, 1715, Australia). Note: A readable on-line copy of *The Practice of the Presence of God* is available from www.PracticeGodsPresence.com. Known as the Light Heart Edition, this version only presents the editor’s preface, the conversations, and the letters of Brother Lawrence. Quotations from *The Practice of the Presence of God* in this book review draw on this on-line version because of its readability.

² In 1666, Brother Lawrence had his first of several interviews with Abbé Joseph de Beaufort who came to learn the “secrets” of his spirituality. Eventually De Beaufort would combine these conversations with some of Lawrence’s letters and publish a book in 1692. Since 1724, there have been several English editions under the title we know today. (p. xiii)

³ Through the practice of the presence of God, Brother Lawrence experienced what the psalmist wrote: “In Your presence is fullness of joy” (Psalm 16:11, New King James Version).

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Elected Silence: The Autobiography of Thomas Merton*, with a foreword by Evelyn Waugh (London: Hollis & Carter, 1949). This edition, used for this book review, was obtained through the Bishop David L. Walker Library at the Caroline Chisholm Centre (P.O. Box 340, Pennant Hills, NSW, 1715, Australia)

Grace

Divine grace is at the heart of all genuine Christian experience. A distinction may be drawn between common (general, universal) grace and special (saving, regenerating) grace to better understand the relationship between divine grace and the human situation. In this review, special grace is being referred to – the grace by which God redeems, sanctifies, and glorifies his people.⁵

Brother Lawrence recognized the absolute necessity of God's grace to enable him to be successful in his walk with God. An example occurs in the ninth letter: "I have no doubt that we shall soon receive an abundance of His grace, with which we can do all things, and, without which we can do nothing but sin".⁶ Again, in his spiritual maxims, Brother Lawrence admonishes the reader to recognize that the soul is dependent on the grace of God – and is needful each moment, as without it the soul can do nothing, since the world, the flesh, and the devil join forces and assault the soul so untiringly. While relying on God seems hard for human nature, grace makes it become easy, and brings with it joy (p. 70).

Thomas Merton, likewise, addresses the necessity of grace from God. Early on, he writes of guidance in life that comes only through God's grace: "I think my love for William Blake had something in it of *God's grace*. It is a love that has never died, and which has entered very deeply into the development of my life" (p. 68, emphasis mine). A little later, he writes in terms of ultimate life and death: "So to compare a soul without grace to a corpse without life is only a metaphor. But it is very apt. I lay on this bed . . . and my soul was rotten with the corruption of my sins. And I did not even care whether I died or lived. . . What is more, there was nothing I could do for myself. There was absolutely no means, no natural

⁵ For this definition of grace, I am indebted to P. E. Hughes, "Grace", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 519-520.

⁶ Ninth Letter, p. 50.

means within reach, for getting out of that state. Only God could help me . . . It was through the prayers of someone who loved God that I was, one day, to be delivered out of that hell where I was already confined without knowing it” (p. 78). Merton’s comment raises the question to what degree is the bestowal of divine grace influenced by the prayer of others. Later, Merton describes grace as follows: “Our nature, which is a free gift of God, was given to us to be perfected and enhanced by another free gift that is not due it. This free gift is “sanctifying grace” . . . the real work is the work of grace, and the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost. What is “grace”? It is God’s own life, shared by us. God’s life is Love. By grace we are able to share in the infinitely self-less love of Him who is pure actuality . . . Indeed, outside of Him there is nothing, and whatever exists exists by His free gift of its being” (p. 121). Finally, he writes that “no one can believe these things merely by wanting to, of his own volition. Unless he receives grace, an actual light and impulsion of the mind and will from God, he cannot even make an act of living faith. It is God who gives us faith, and no one cometh to Christ unless the Father draweth him” (p. 147).

This theme of divine grace is found in other writers of Christian spirituality. Simone Weil (1909-1943), for example, shows in her work how all aspects of experience can be creatively transformed into channels of waiting for divine presence and grace. All human activities and experiences, whatever they are, can become a way and means for loving God, but God’s own disclosure is ultimately *utterly gratuitous*.⁷ One of the major ideas of Margery Kempe, in her work *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is that God loves, *is revealed to*, and in his grace uses quite ordinary people in his many extraordinary ways of dealing with the world.⁸

⁷ For the way these thoughts are well encapsulated, I am indebted to Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1998), 202.

⁸ King, *Christian Mystics*, 129.

Conversion

Conversion can be a dramatic, living encounter with God (for example, as experienced by Paul on his way to Damascus), giving witness to the power of the Spirit of Christ – so powerful and compelling that the person can almost not resist the divine summons to a new life.⁹ On the other hand, responding to a spiritual call may also involve a longer, drawn out struggle between yielding to worldly influences or to God's summons.

Brother Lawrence, or Nicholas Herman as he was named before he entered the Carmelite monastery in Paris and took his religious name, had joined the French army and was wounded during his military service (p. x). He was taken home to his parents to recover and his military career ended there. This time of recovery allowed him to ponder life and the importance of spending it properly (there is a parallel here with Ignatius of Loyola who was also wounded in battle, causing sober reflection on life¹⁰) – and it must have been during this time that he later describes his conversion.¹¹ It was during winter, upon seeing a tree stripped of its leaves and considering that, within a little time, the leaves would be renewed and, after that, the flowers and fruit appear, that Brother Lawrence received a profound and inspired view of the providence and power of God which was never erased from his soul (p. 3). Notwithstanding the supernatural insight, there is a connection between faith and intellect. Brother Lawrence reports being saved by thinking – reflecting on a barren tree. This accession of faith through reason or contemplation is one of the philosophical threads from the Renaissance through to the 18th century. For faith to arrive through the abstraction of meaning

⁹ King, *Christian Mystics*, 14-15.

¹⁰ King, *Christian Mystics*, 135. Note: King writes that during his military career, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was wounded during the siege of Pamplona (1521) and that during his long convalescence he underwent a *profound religious conversion* [emphasis mine]. Following this, he devoted a year to prayer and mortification at Manresa, experiencing both temptations and numerous mystical insights.

¹¹ Fr. Jerome Lantry, OCD, "Living in the Presence of God: Brother Lawrence", copyright 2001-2008 Help Fellowship, Inc; accessed November 25, 2008; available from <http://www.helpfellowship.org/OCDS%20Lessons/Lesson%2017.htm>; Internet.

of a winter scene, the mind or reason must be closely involved with the soul – in other words, the life of faith must be connected to the life of thought. A disciplined mind is involved, as Brother Lawrence writes: “We must do all things thoughtfully and soberly without impetuosity or precipitancy, which denotes a mind undisciplined” (p. 72).¹²

By contrast, Thomas Merton’s conversion, described in *Elected Silence*, occurred in stages, through slow progress, and involved going from narcissism, to communism, and to Catholicism. He writes that “I would one day come, in a *roundabout way*, to the only true Church and to the One Living God, through His Son, Jesus Christ” (p. 70, emphasis mine). Further in his story, he states that “so far, however, there had been no deep movement of my will, nothing that amounted to a conversion, nothing to shake the iron tyranny of moral corruption that held my whole nature in fetters. But that also was to come” (p. 86). His inward fight is illustrated as he acknowledges that “we refuse to hear the million different voices through which God speaks to us, and every refusal hardens us more and more against His grace – and yet He continues to speak to us: and we say He is without mercy!” (p. 96). The struggle continues as he confesses that “I was still so completely chained and fettered by my sins and my attachments” (p. 143). A parallel exists here with Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who in his *Confessions*, also tells the story of his restlessness and recklessness, as well as his search and yearning, until he found God and became a Christian.¹³ Likewise, in Teresa of Avila we see a struggle occurring. Apparently she vacillated for almost twenty years between

¹² For these thoughts connecting faith and intellect, I am indebted to Robert Harris, “Notes and Questions for Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1611-1691), *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1693, French; 1724, English)”, copyright 1999; accessed November 25, 2008; available from: <http://www.virtualsalt.com/lit/lawrence.htm>; Internet. Note: The author, Robert Harris, is a writer and educator with more than 25 years of teaching experience at the college and university level.

¹³ King, *Christian Mystics*, 54. Note: King also writes that “after a long and tempestuous quest, he [Augustine] was compelled to recognize that ‘The true philosopher is the lover of God’. In these words from *The City of God* he left a portrait of himself. At first, attracted by philosophy and the ideal of contemplation, he eventually became one of the most ardent lovers of God” (p. 54).

worldly and spiritual aspirations, trying to find a balance between her relationship to the world and that to God.¹⁴

In summary, while a conversion experience may involve a protracted struggle, nevertheless, there is typically an indelible point of divine illumination – which both Brother Lawrence and Merton reached in their own ways.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there is an integration of mind and faith – a connection between the physical and the spiritual (where the physical world can lead to the spiritual world).¹⁶

Prayer

Prayer remains an integral part of Christian spirituality. The approach to prayer in devotion and contemplation may be *theocentric* where the focus is on God – on God's being and attributes. Or, the approach can be *Christocentric* where the focus is on the figure of Jesus Christ – on his humanity (suffering, death, and resurrection) or as the divine Logos and eternal Word. Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, exemplifies a Christocentric prayer orientation in her *The Story of a Soul*.

For Brother Lawrence, the set times of prayer were no different from other times, because he had disciplined himself to be in a continual attitude of prayer. He withdrew to pray when directed by his superior, but he did not need such assigned times, nor ask for them,

¹⁴ King, *Christian Mystics*, 138. Note: King adds that “this deep division within her was eventually overcome when she experienced a stunning conversion, resulting in an intense journey of prayer and active religious reform over the remaining years of her life” (p. 138).

¹⁵ In the case of Brother Lawrence we read: “During that winter, upon seeing a tree stripped of its leaves and considering that, within a little time, the leaves would be renewed and, after that, the flowers and fruit appear; Brother Lawrence received a high view of the providence and power of God which has never since been effaced from his soul. This view had perfectly set him free from the world and kindled in him such a love for God, that he could not tell whether it had increased in the forty years that he had lived since” (First Conversation, p. 3). In the case of Thomas Merton we read: “The morning that followed . . . my soul [was] broken with contrition, but broken and clean, painful but sanitary like a lanced abscess, like a bone broken and re-set. I took holy water at the door and went straight up to the altar rail and knelt down and said, slowly, with all the belief I had in me, the Our Father” (p. 87).

¹⁶ Harris, “Notes and Questions for Brother Lawrence”, Internet.

because his greatest labor did not divert him from God.¹⁷ In fact, Brother Lawrence felt it was a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times – when the appointed times of prayer were past, he found no difference, because he still continued with God, praising and thanking Him with all his might.¹⁸ In this case, as McGrath would argue, the historical and cultural location affected the lived Christian experience of Brother Lawrence which, however, is different for most people today.¹⁹ Consequently, to maintain such a high level of unceasing prayer and intimacy with God throughout a day, as Brother Lawrence did in his monastic setting, may well not be viable in today's western world, characterized by busyness and distraction. Also, Brother Lawrence's premise of not needing set times of prayer goes contrary to biblical teaching (for example, Jesus' oft leaving the company of others for private prayer) and centuries of Christian tradition (demonstrating the value of personal time for prayer).

Furthermore, Brother Lawrence learned to distinguish between *God* and the *consolations of God*. In the beginning, for the first ten years, he suffered a great deal. He felt apprehensive of not being devoted to God as he had desired to be, and with his past sins always on his mind, he considered the prospect of spending the rest of his life in such a state.²⁰ At last, he discovered this did not diminish the trust he had in God – in fact, it only served to increase his faith! All at once, it seemed, he found himself changed – and he experienced a profound inward peace.²¹ To spend years in dryness, with a continual sense of God's absence and a realization of one's own sinfulness, is indeed a painful journey – until one can recognize God's presence through it all. Finally, in his fifth letter, Brother Lawrence was able to write

¹⁷ Second Conversation, p. 10.

¹⁸ Fourth Conversation, pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 135-140.

²⁰ Second Letter, p. 30-31.

²¹ Second Letter, p. 30-31.

that there is not a more delightful way of life in the world than that of a continued conversation with God.²² Yet he cautioned against seeking such a consolation only for its pleasure – rather, the practice of the presence of God should be done from the principle of love, and because it is God's will for human beings.²³ To conclude, in reviewing *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence exemplifies a theocentric approach toward prayer – there are relatively few references to Jesus Christ when compared to God.²⁴

In *Elected Silence*, Thomas Merton presents prayer from a different perspective – that of someone seeking meaning through God and who is growing in a deeper relationship with God through prayer. Notice Merton's growth in his depth of experience in prayer. Early in his work, he writes that “If I did pray for my father it was probably one of those blind, semi-instinctive movements of nature that will come to anyone, even an atheist in a time of crisis, and which do not prove the existence of God, exactly, but which certainly show that the need to worship and acknowledge Him is something deeply ingrained in our dependent natures, and simply inseparable from our essence” (p. 23). Later in the story he notes that “just about the time when I most needed it, I did acquire a little natural faith, and found many occasions of praying and lifting up my mind to God” (p. 52). Then after a critical turning point he writes: “And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray – praying not with my lips and my intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery. There were tears connected with this, and they did me good” (p. 86). Finally, he could write: “And I, drawn into that atmosphere, into that deep, vast universal movement of vitalizing prayer,

²² Fifth letter, p. 42.

²³ Fifth letter, p. 42.

²⁴ A computer word search for the terms “Jesus Christ” and “God” quickly confirm this.

which is Christ praying in men to His Father, could not but begin at last to live, and to know that I was alive. And my heart could not but help cry out within me: Psalm 104:33-34. Truly, He was sending forth His Spirit, uttering His divine Word and binding me to Himself through His Spirit proceeding from the Word spoken within me. As the months went on, I could not help but realize it” (p. 226). In closing, *Elected Silence* conveys both a theocentric and Christocentric approach toward devotion and prayer.

Lacking overall in both the writings of Brother Lawrence and Thomas Merton is the third Person of the Triune Godhead, the Holy Spirit, which Alexander Schmemann discusses at length.

Presence of God

A central and fundamental element of Christian spirituality (as well as of the biblical record) is the experience of the presence of God – the awareness of the presence of the divine Spirit of God in life and in the world.

Brother Lawrence, through faith, came to a special appreciation of this mystery. It is well to realize that the ability of Brother Lawrence to penetrate this mystery was itself a gift of God. A person should not take his admonitions as a technique for producing an effect, but as ways of disposing themselves for whatever degree of understanding the Lord wants to give to them.²⁵ In his first conversation, Brother Lawrence states that “we should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him”.²⁶ It requires discipline of mind to put away idle thoughts, to halt flights of imagination that move away from reality, and

²⁵ For the insights in the paragraph, I am indebted to Fr. Jerome Lantry, OCD, “Living in the Presence of God: Brother Lawrence”, copyright 2001-2008 Help Fellowship, Inc; accessed November 25, 2008; available from <http://www.helpfellowship.org/OCDS%20Lessons/Lesson%2017.htm>; Internet.

²⁶ First Conversation, p. 4.

to train the mind to attend to the greatest of all realities: God among us.²⁷ Consequently, Brother Lawrence writes that “we should feed and nourish our soul with high notions of God which would yield us great joy in being devoted to Him”.²⁸ Later, in his spiritual maxims, he defines practicing the presence of God as applying one’s spirit to God or realizing that God is present (p. 79). Realizing the presence of God is described in a multifaceted manner and includes a simple *act*, a clear and distinct *knowledge* of God, a *view* as through a glass, a loving *gaze*, an inward sense of God, a *waiting* on God, a silent *converse* with God, a *repose* in God, or the *life* and *peace* of the soul (p. 79). This realization is developed by unwearying effort in constantly recalling one’s mind to the presence of God (p. 80).

Within Brother Lawrence’s rich framework of the description of the presence of God would fit the contributions of other Christian spirituality writers regarding God’s presence. Thomas Merton, for example, alludes to the mountains surrounding Jerusalem, and in like manner the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore (Ps. 125:2). He writes that “it was true, I was hidden in the secrecy of His protection. He was surrounding me constantly with the work of His love, His wisdom and His mercy. And so it would be, day after day, year after year. Sometimes I would be preoccupied with problems that seemed to be difficult, and yet when it was all over the answers that I worked out did not seem to matter much, because all the while, beyond my range of vision and comprehension, God had silently and imperceptibly worked the whole thing out for me, and had presented me with the solution” (p. 301). Symeon the New Theologian (949-1032) implies the presence of God when he writes about the love of God for human beings, and the deep spiritual intimacy and union of the whole person, body and soul together, with its divine source and creator – in other words, God

²⁷ Lantry, “Living in the Presence of God”, Internet.

²⁸ First Conversation, p. 4.

is not only the transcendent Other; rather He can be known here and now, in this present life, through direct personal experience, not only by monks but also by lay people.²⁹ Likewise, Julian of Norwich (1342-1423) understood the presence of God through her visions, the theme of which was the greatness of God's love for us, enfolding us like our clothing – that is, God embraces, guides, and surrounds us with a tender love that never deserts us.³⁰ Finally, in reading through the *Journal of a Soul* by Pope John XXIII, one quickly recognizes a man of humility who earnestly strove to live life in the presence of God, thereby attaining “a more intense interior and supernatural life”.³¹

Relevance for Today

Through Brother Lawrence, one receives a heightened awareness of being able to go to God and to engage in continual conversation by understanding him as intimately present. This leads to putting into effect *another* form of the practice of the presence of God – to find him present in those around us. In doing so, one is uniting the first commandment and the second which resembles it (Mt 22:38-39). This presence of God in others takes many forms. There is the privileged revealing of His presence in the brothers and sisters of the Christian faith, both individually and as a group. But one is also invited to recognize as belonging to us, those who are not of the Christian faith – believers of other religions and those who do not believe at all. And, one of the truly special revelations of the presence of God is found in the destitute and those who suffer. Merton also refers to this when he writes of “seeing Christ suffering in His members, and . . . going to help Him, who said: ‘Whatsoever you did to the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me’” (p. 258). Additionally, through the practice of the presence (or

²⁹ King, *Christian Mystics*, 177-179.

³⁰ King, *Christian Mystics*, 128.

³¹ Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 287.

experience) of God proposed by Brother Lawrence, one can learn how discover the Lord in the events of history, and from that to discern the signs of the times. Finally, by letting oneself be evangelized by the practice of the presence of God, one also becomes an evangelizer of the presence of God – in other words, by turning the heart ever more frequently towards the living God, one's spiritual life will renew its dynamism, rediscover a sense of adoration, and receive a new evangelizing impetus.³²

In a different way, Merton's insights in *Elected Silence* also bear validity and relevance for today. A lost soul himself, his book addresses the lost souls of the twenty-first century – in some ways, it is the story of the soul of our age. His narrative echoes and mirrors the spiritual condition of the contemporary person: a wounded orphan-child, rootless and restless, narcissistic and creative, vexed and tormented by the specters of evil under which they came into the world, suffering a kind of spiritual starvation that gnaws at one.³³ Early in *Elected Silence* he writes of his existential dilemma: “Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born” (p. 3). He describes the world as “full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers” (p. 3). Emptiness of soul is reflected in the following words: “[I had] walked out into the world that I thought I was going to ransack and rob of all its pleasures and satisfactions. I had done what I intended, and now I found that it was I who was gutted. What a strange thing! In filling myself, I had emptied myself” (p. 117). The human predicament is

³² I believe that the practice of the presence of God is indeed relevant for today. For the insights in this paragraph, however, I am indebted to Fr. Jerome Lantry, OCD, “Living in the Presence of God: Brother Lawrence”, copyright 2001-2008 Help Fellowship, Inc; accessed November 25, 2008; available from <http://www.helpfellowship.org/OCDS%20Lessons/Lesson%2017.htm>; Internet.

³³ For the thoughts in this expressive sentence, I am indebted to Sr. Kathleen Deignan, CND, “Thomas Merton: Soul of the Age” in *Bulletin 74, April 2005*; accessed November 25, 2008; available from <http://monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=510>; Internet.

seen when he writes of “the emptiness and futility and nothingness of the world once more invaded me from every side” (p. 269). Finally, the hunger for meaning shows itself when he writes that ours is “a country full of people who want to be kind and pleasant and happy and love good things and serve God, but do not know how. And they do not know where to turn to find out. They are surrounded by all kinds of sources of information which only conspire to bewilder them more and more” (p. 168). Such is man’s dilemma without the grace of God as Spirit.

Conclusion

Reading both *The Practice of the Presence of God* and *Elected Silence* can bring a special pleasure as one discovers unexpected, original, and innovative insights for life today. Many of the characters in *Elected Silence* have continued to be reincarnated down to our time.³⁴ Two notes of caution: reading a more modern version of Brother Lawrence’s book brings added enjoyment and understanding; as life continued for Thomas Merton, he himself recognized that he had greatly matured in his spiritual perspectives when compared to what he shared in *Elected Silence* (for example, the withdrawal from a world of corruption and materialism in the beginning, to a later return with compassion for its suffering). Both books, however, have even yet not exhausted all that they have to say to their readers.³⁵

³⁴ For some of the wording here, I am indebted to Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* (London: Vintage, 2000), 3-9.

³⁵ Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* 3-9.