

# **The Practice of the Presence of God**

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The modern mind is no longer the Greek or medieval mind; it is inductive in its approach to things and its starting point is the actual world about us. It is also dynamic, geared to change and bent on finding the stuff of its thinking in the existential order of things. In practice, this means that if the spiritual life is to be relevant today, it must be a dimension of real life. The earthly path is the one to heaven and one must find God in the works of his hands, especially in persons.

This new outlook seems to be very much in line with biblical spirituality. The best days of Old Testament spirituality were passed in the desert when life was a Passage from the slavery of Egypt to the Promised Land. It was then that the Living God was felt to be close to his people. They depended entirely upon him for food and guidance and were led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The felt presence of God in their midst was the greatest factor in their history. He was their God and they were his people. The Tent was where they met him. We make a clear distinction between the first and secondary causes. The chosen people overlooked this distinction and attributed everything to God. His intervention was their history. They saw everything in his light and their best days were passed in the radiance of his Face.

One cannot read the Old Testament without being struck by the vivid consciousness of God which his people had. In the first Book of Revelation we read how God said to Abram: "I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). The chosen people did not always obey this command. Sin often led them to hide from the Face of God as sinful Adam did but they were conscious of it.

When Tobit was carried away captive, all his brethren ate the food of the Gentiles but Tobit "remembered God" with all his heart. He gave the same solid advice to his son and asked him to keep God in his mind all his days.

The great figures of the Old Covenant were keenly aware of the eye of God upon them. Job asked in desperation: "How long wilt thou not look away from me, nor let me alone till I swallow my spittle?" (Job 7:19). And the Psalmist: "Look away that I may breathe again" (Ps. 38).

The prophets were all men filled with the divine presence. Elijah (Elias) is typical of them all. He rose up like a fire and his word burned like a torch (Sirach 48:1) because his soul was full of God in whose presence he stood, always ready to do his bidding.

The Book of Psalms is the supreme expression of the spirituality of the Old Covenant and from beginning to end the presence of God to his people is its basic theme. Psalm 139 is typical:

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I ascend to heaven thou art there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!  
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
Even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.

Their constant prayer is that God might lift up the light of his Face upon them and be a lamp to their feet and a light to their path.

The Exodus spirituality is a necessary introduction to our own. Its basic facts are, of course, the Creation and the Redemption. Both are not just events that took place in the past. The Creation continues and we are co-operators with God in bringing it to perfection. The Redemption is also a continuing process that will end only when all the members of the mystical body are glorified in Christ in the consummation of the paschal mystery. We are pilgrims of eternity on our way in Christ from the slavery of sin to the full freedom of our Promised Land.

God entered our lives and our history to re-create us in his own image. As Gunter Bornkaum puts it: "To make the reality of God present: this is the essential mystery of Jesus". Through Baptism our lives are hidden away in Christ; we become members of his mystical body that we may grow to the fullness of age in him. "He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 15). He is God with us in a far more intimate way than He was present to his people of old. It is in him we live and move and have our spiritual being. He is our sphere of existence, our environment.

Where Creation is there is God; where Redemption is there is Christ. And so we are living parts of a great on-going process in which we are nearer to God than we are to ourselves.

"God is at work everywhere carrying out the designs of his will" (Eph. 1:2).

"In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Christ ascended into heaven "to fill creation with his presence" (Eph. 4:10).

In keeping with modern thought present-day theology stresses the fact that God is present in the world to build a new heaven and a new earth; in other words He is the God of the future. His transcendence, properly understood, embraces immanence. The creature is completely permeated by God's unceasing action and yet God is totally Other.

The modern mind shows a bent towards the future and is vitally interested in building a better world for humankind. A true Christian outlook should see that humanity is not alone in this great work; that it is the very reason for the Incarnation and that we are co-operators with the cosmic Christ. "For He has

made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10).

Down to the rise of modern science God was seen at work in the world and in the works of his hands. “My Father is working still and I am working” (Jn. 5:17). The mind of Christ that saw everything here below as a symbol of something above was a part of the Christian outlook. The world was a great monstrosity showing us the Face of God and everything was clothed in the beauty of his countenance. St. Hilary asks “Who can look on nature and not see God?” The whole of nature was a divine milieu; the visible was the footprint of the Invisible and as the poet expressed it “Earth's crammed with heaven.”

The rise of science and technology has brought about a growing alienation from God. Things have become forces, monads and cells: they are no longer words God has spoken and that speak of him and his presence. As Cardinal Danielou writes: “Nature sings the glory of God; the machine sings the glory of man.” The modern ear is attuned only to the machine.

The extraordinary progress of science has given humanity a false sense of independence: man has declared himself God and usurped the place of God in human life. Over a century ago Dostoevsky foretold this state of things: “The old morality will disappear. Men will strive to extract every kind of pleasure from life. The human spirit will be puffed up with satanical pride: man will be his own God. With his conquest of nature man will experience a joy that will replace his hopes of happiness in a future world.” [1]

This describes the actual state of things. Humanity has begun to live from below and spurns any light from above. The trust humanity placed in God has been transferred to science and the miracles of technology have replaced the miracles of the Gospel. All this, however, is on the instrumental, existential level and there are signs that the basic problems of the meaning of life still bother man. As Gerard Philips writes: “Never has man had such a surfeit of good things, and never has he hungered as he does today. Never has he been able to exploit the energies of nature as he can today and yet his anguish is of cosmic dimensions. His insolence is a cover-up for the distress he refuses to acknowledge. He laughs that he may not weep. With all his blusterings he cannot stifle the incessant clamouring within. Each time the fundamental questions are dismissed, they leap back to the forefront.” [2]

The wave of religious emotion that is sweeping the world and that finds expression in the anti-culture movement has been provoked by the rank materialism of the West. As Schillebeeckx writes: “All kinds of ‘spiritual movements’ are emerging and they are most in evidence where secularization has taken effect most completely. The process of secularization has been accompanied by an increase in all kinds of neuroses and psychoses and of phenomena such as the consulting of horoscopes.” [3]

One is reminded of the words of the prophet Amos: “Behold the days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.” (8:11).

This hunger for God is our opportunity, as Carmelites – sons and daughters of the Prophet – to present the Practice of the Presence of God to our age in such a way that it will be relevant. It is our duty to re-vitalize this old Exercise that has been the very substance of Carmelite spirituality.

The time seems to be opportune. Fr. Dalrymple, who is a man of wide experience in England, holds that young people today find the beginnings of their prayer in things about them, especially in people, and from there they rise to God. He adds that “The idea of presence is an increasingly meaningful one to describe prayer and contemplation. By considering the different ways we are present to a stranger, a friend and a lover, we can see how prayer develops beyond the stage of saying prayers to an abiding sense of being with God in all the multifarious activities of the day till an enduring relationship (I-Thou) to God is achieved.” [4]

There are also many indications that the Practice of the Presence of God is growing in adult circles as one of the new forms of prayer.

Perhaps the best exponent of this exercise is Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (c.1611-1691). His little work entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God* [5] has been translated into many languages and is very popular among non-Catholics. It is found in many Protestant church racks and bookshops. The sight of a dry, leafless tree in midwinter led him to reflect on the divine power that would transform it in springtime. He left the world where he was a coachman and entered Carmel where he became cook in the convent of Paris. His greatest desire was to spread this devotion: “If I were a preacher I would preach the Practice of the Presence of God before everything else; if I were a director of souls, I would advise the world to follow it, so necessary and so easy is it.” (Second Letter, p. 16). When he discovered that the purpose of all spiritual exercises is union with God, he wrote: “I have given up all devotions and pieties which are not of obligation, and instead try to keep myself always in God's presence by simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon him.” (Fifth Letter, p. 20). “To be with God it is not necessary to be always in church. We may make a chapel of our hearts whereto to escape from time to time to talk with him quietly, humbly and lovingly. Everyone is capable of such close communion with God, some more, some less; He knows what we can do.” (Fourth Letter, p. 18). “There is no life in the world happier or more full of delight than one of continual communion with God – they only can realize it who have practised and experienced it.” (Second Letter, p. 16).

The actual practice of the Presence of God has many forms. Since it is in God, the Creator, that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), we can all say with St. Catherine of Genoa: “My Me is God”; or with St. Augustine: “He is nearer to me than I am to myself.” Where God acts, there He is present and this presence transcends the whole of his creation. Our dependence on him is absolute.

Cardinal Newman treats of this form of divine presence when he writes: “If I looked into a mirror and did not see my own face I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me when I look into this living, busy world and see no reflection of its Creator ... Were it not for this voice speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world.” [6]

This presence of God in things is the basis of Eastern Mysticism that is so prevalent in the West due to the influence of Zen-Buddhism. The Romantic poets have always felt a divine presence in nature and those who look upon God as “the ground of Being” find him there. However, one must avoid a form of immanence unrelieved by transcendence.

It is in human beings that God is present in a special way for men and women are the living images of God and a revelation of him. As St. Irenaeus of Lyons observed: “Gloria Dei vivens homo; vita autem hominis est visio Dei” (the glory of God is men and women fully alive). [7]

Love, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, did not permit God to remain alone but urged him to share his life and love with us. By creation humanity is a visible projection of the invisible God: a vision of him. This image is dim but real and “the root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God.” [8] Our whole being is immersed in the infinite love of God and we were made to hold dialogue with him. It is in humanity and through humanity that God has revealed himself. Christ, the Man, is the living Image of the God we cannot see.

The human heart seeks God and is hungry for him even when it is completely unconscious of the fact.

However, God is present to the Christian in a special way. We who were far off have been brought near through the grace of divine adoption. We are daughters and sons in the Son and “oned” to him in a most intimate way. He is the Vine; we are the branches. He is the Head and we are his members. We are born into Christ to reach a fullness of age in him and become his loving images.

Grace, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is an assimilation to Christ in mind and heart and spirit. And the more we strive to live in him, the more He lives in us to become the great living Reality of our lives.

According to an old Roman saying friendship finds or makes equality. God has made us lovable that we may share kinship with Christ and be able to live in the sweet companionship of his love and friendship.

In one of his Letters Seneca gives a word of advice to a friend: “My dear friend, I wish to end by giving you a useful piece of advice which I beg you to take to heart. It is that we should select some really good man whom we will constantly bear in mind, and under whose eye we will imagine ourselves to be always living and acting. For most of the faults that are committed would be prevented if a witness had been present when they were about to be perpetrated. Therefore, let us call to mind someone we greatly respect and let the thought of him sanctify the most secret of our actions.”

Surely for Christians the Someone is Christ for who is Friend like him? He proved his love by dying for us and there is no greater love than this. And if we live in his presence He will sanctify our most secret thoughts. The apostles, martyrs and saints all met the challenge of Paul: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35).

St. Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) explains why we need the friendship of Christ: “We are not angels for we have a body. To attempt to play the angel on this earth is

foolish. Ordinarily, we need a leaning-staff for our thoughts. When occupations, persecutions, pain, trouble and repose – when dryness comes to me – Jesus Christ is our very good friend. He becomes a companion for us; and when we accustom ourselves to the thought, it is very easy to find him standing close beside us ... If you accustom yourselves to having him at your side, and if He sees that you love him to be there and that you are always trying to please him, you will never be able, as we put it, to send him away nor will He ever fail you ... Do you think it is a small thing to have such a friend as that beside you?" [9]

Since Christ is the "Mighty Word upholding all things" (Heb. 1:3), we ought to find him in the world made in his image and likeness and redeemed by him. "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God." (Rom. 8:19). And the final Sentence He will pronounce upon humankind shows that He wishes to be found, loved and served in his fellow - men. St. Francis de Sales asks us to see the neighbour in the heart of Christ. It is there where he was when Christ suffered on Calvary and it is there where he still is. Faith should lead us to see the neighbour as the sacrament of Christ, and we could be everyone on whom the eyes of Christ rested. Each and every one of us is the traveller who was robbed, beaten and left to die, into whose wounds Christ poured the wine and oil of divine love and compassion. Each one of us is the Lazarus He called from the tomb, the blind man to whom he gave sight and the deaf and dumb to whom He gave the power to hear and bear witness. Faith should reveal Christ working among men.

From the redeeming Christ in our midst, we should find our way in to the Christ at the centre of our being where we are rooted and founded in him. We ought to live for the day when we are able to repeat St. Paul's words: "I live, now not I, Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:30).

Down the ages the saints have found their way in to the Indwelling Spirit, but to the great majority the Holy Spirit remains the Unknown God. How true what Courtois writes: "It is not our age which is poor but the men who live in it that are dwarfs, because they no longer have with them and in them the Spirit of the Living God. What is lacking in our time is nothing else but the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We lack men who, in their daily lives, depend upon the Holy Spirit, men who, day after day, strive to walk in the presence of the living Christ." [10]

The difficulty is that we interpret grace as a Thing while, in reality, it is Someone. As Rahner puts it: "The first thing we must do is to listen simply to what Scripture tells us about the Spirit. That accepted, believed, lived, embraced and loved in the depths of one's being ... that is the Holy Spirit! There He encounters us as He is and not as a mere abstract appropriation. In any event our true supernatural life consists in the communication of the Divine Spirit and everything one can say about the essence, glory and end of the Christian can be summed up by saying that he has received the Spirit of the Father, and in this way has been filled with the divine life." [11]

When the saints discovered this Someone in the depths of their souls, it changed their whole life and was the beginning of what they called their conversion. The early martyrs were full of the Holy Spirit and looked upon themselves as Godbearers. And for the early Fathers we are composed of body, soul and Holy Spirit. What the soul is to body, the Holy Spirit is to the soul.

Eusebius tells us how Leonidas, the father of Origen, used to kneel down and kiss the breast of his sleeping child because he believed it was inhabited by the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine looked everywhere for God and found him in his own heart: "Return to your own heart and find him." And again: "O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, too late have I known thee, too late have I loved thee. And behold thou wast within me whilst I was without seeking thee ... Thou wast with me but I was not with thee." [12]

St. Teresa of Jesus also regretted the time during which she neglected the great king dwelling in the little palace of her soul. And she adds: "Remember how St. Augustine tells us about how he sought God in many places and eventually found him within himself ... We need no wings to go in search of him but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon him present within us ... Remember how important it is for you to have understood this truth – that the Lord is within us and that we should be there with him." [13]

When Elizabeth of the Trinity "discovered" the "In-dwelling Trinity" all became clear to her: "It seems to me that I have found my heaven on earth since heaven is God and God is in my soul. The day I understood that, everything became clear to me." [14]

"Lo, you were Someone all of a sudden." In his "Magnificat" Paul Claudel, who grew up an agnostic, describes how one Christmas Day he went to Notre-Dame where Vespers were being chanted. All in a moment God became Someone for him and from that time his entire life was dominated by the presence of God.

Cardinal Newman would define the Christian as one with a ruling sense of God's presence: "A true Christian, then, may almost be defined as one who has a ruling sense of God's presence within him ... In all circumstances of joy or sorrow, hope or fear, let us aim at having him in our inmost hearts; let us have no secret apart from him. Let us acknowledge him as enthroned within us at the very spring of thought and affection ... This is the true life of the saints. This is to have the Spirit witnessing with our spirit that we are the sons of God." [15]

The Holy Spirit is not just the sweet Guest of our souls. As St. Gregory the Great says: "God is love and love is never idle." He is the Living Spring that never ceases to flow; the Living Fire that never ceases to consume and inflame and diffuse the life of God into our souls. He is the Finger of God moulding, forming and shaping us into the living images of Christ and leading us along the way that is Christ.

St. Paul reveals the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives when he writes to the Corinthians: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

The life that is being transfigured by the Holy Spirit is the life we live day-in and day-out in our daily occupations. It was in the framework of daily toil that Christ accomplished the work of our redemption: it is in the same setting that we sanctify ourselves and redeem the world about us.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (Jn. 12:32). It is through the power of his Spirit that Christ is drawing us into himself.

He revealed the basic attitude of his life when He said: "I live for the Father." The Indwelling Spirit is drawing us into the current of loving surrender that still fills the heart of Christ. If we accept life as it comes in the spirit of loving surrender to the Father's will we are surely co-operating with the Holy Spirit and our life is going, moment by moment, into the Father in Christ. The living stream of divine life is bearing us back to its Source.

St. John tells us that "He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." (1 Jn. 2:6).

It requires a living faith to live and walk in the light of the Indwelling Spirit. Faith is the medium through which we see God; the deeper it is the keener is our sense of his Reality and of his all-pervading presence. And since prayer is the oil in the lamp of faith there is no awakening to the divine presence within us without persevering prayer. The more our life becomes prayerful, the clearer is our vision of God. A certain measure of detachment is required for the Practice of the Presence of God. We are the pilgrims of eternity; we do not have here a lasting city; we must live in two worlds at the same time. It is when the light from above meets the light from below that we can build the Kingdom of Christ and a better world for humankind at the same time.

By approaching daily the twofold table of the Word and the Eucharist we can make Christ a living reality in our daily lives. The word of God is life and spirit: it is the Word re-creating the world in his own image. St. Jerome writes about a friend who, by prayer and study, made his heart the living library of the words of Christ. A heart of this kind is full of the Holy Spirit.

Mary is the supreme example of one who knows how to ponder the word of God. She kept all the things that were said to her about her Son and pondered them lovingly in her heart. This is how She became the perfect disciple of Christ.

The Eucharist is Christ himself coming to renew his presence in us and to make us more alive to his presence in the mystical body. We receive the Body of Christ to become his Body, the Church. As Schillebeeckx writes: "In the new approach to the distinctively Eucharistic presence of Christ, an attempt is made above all to situate this presence within the sphere of Christ's real presence in the believer and in the whole believing community. In this way, the early Christian view can be recovered in its full dimensions – the distinctively eucharistic presence is directed towards bringing about Christ's more intimate presence in each individual believer and in the community of believers as a whole. The eucharistic presence is thus no longer isolated." [16]

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." (James 3:8). God is seeking us with a love infinitely greater than we could ever imagine. It is a haunting love which found expression in the words from the Cross: "I thirst". The love that reduced him to the utter weakness of the Cross is still seeking us. As De Caussade writes: "He is offering himself to me at every moment, in every place. When I see this ... everything becomes bread to feed me, fire to purify me, a chisel to shape me according to the heavenly pattern. Everything becomes an instrument of grace for my necessities. Now I see that the One I used to seek in other directions is himself seeking me incessantly, and giving himself to me in everything that happens." [17]



“Come and see.” (Jn. 1:39). Christ's invitation to Andrew to come and abide with him goes out to all. It was in his divine presence that Andrew found the love that lifted him to the Cross and united him so closely to his Master. Draw near to me and I will draw near to you; this is a promise of tremendous spiritual value. If we open our hearts to him in the spirit of faith and loving surrender, He will take full possession of our souls and make them all his own.

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