

We are blessed, in our modern age, to have at our fingertips modern video content from Bishop Barron, Fr Mike Schmitz, and others. But today, as we celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, I want to go back in time and discuss a book, written in the 1600s, by Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk. The book is entitled, "The Practice of the Presence of God," and Peter Kreeft calls it, "The easiest book on how to become a saint." Not that we at St. James are looking for shortcuts, but I thought it you might appreciate the wisdom from this small, 40-page book about one man's efforts to make Christ HIS King.

This first passage tells us a little about Brother Lawrence and how he sees his King. "I consider myself as the most wretched of men, full of sores and corruption, who has committed all sorts of crimes against his King; touched with a sense of regret, I confess to him all my wickedness, and I ask his forgiveness." Brother Lawrence starts with a statement of humility that makes him approachable, speaking to us as a brother who is vulnerable about his imperfections. This mindset also appeals to God because it leaves our egos behind so God can work in our hearts.

Brother Lawrence goes on to say, "I abandoned myself in God's hands that he may do what he pleases with me. The King, full of mercy and goodness, very far from chastising me, embraces me with love, makes me eat at his table, serves me with his own hands, gives me the key of his treasures; he converses and delights himself with me incessantly, in a thousand and a thousand ways, and treats me in all respects as his favorite. It is thus I consider myself from time to time IN his holy presence." Here is a man who, in spite of his imperfections, shows us how to place our lives at the foot of our King and find great joy in this relationship.

Let's back up and ask, who is Brother Lawrence? He was born in 1605, into a poor family in Lorraine, now part of France, and at 18 years of age, he noticed a tree in the dead of winter stripped of its leaves and considered the enormity of God's power to renew the tree with flowers and fruit each year. This experience kindled in him such a love for God that he said his 40 years as a monk had not increased it. Let's take a moment to think about our own faith journeys. Think about the first time God introduced Himself to you in personal way... As a King, he gathers in his people, just as we saw with Jesus, encountering each apostle and calling them to follow Him.

Brother Lawrence served in the bloody "30-Year War" in France and was nearly killed by an injury affecting his sciatic nerve, and he limped and suffered chronic pain for the rest of his life. He was also traumatized by the violence of war, a condition we later labeled as PTSD. He struggled for several years and at the age of 26 he entered a Carmelite Monastery in Paris. Since he lacked education, he was unable to pursue the priesthood, so he became a monk and was assigned the humble role of cook for the 100-plus occupants living in the monastery.

In joining the Carmelites, he intended to sacrifice his life and its pleasures to God. He says in the book he instead, "Met with nothing but satisfaction in his state as a monk."

It seemed the more he gave of himself, the more his King gave back to him. His path to satisfaction came from abandoning his desire for it, pursuing only God, and GAINING life's satisfaction beyond his wildest dreams. This is one of the reasons I find this book so intriguing.

So, what is "The Practice of the Presence of God." Simply two things. First, renounce anything that would take us away from God. Brother Lawrence says, "Let us think often that our only business in this life is to please God, and that all besides is but folly and vanity." He says, "The heart must be empty of all other things; because God will possess the heart alone and do in it what He pleases." In today's gospel Jesus says, "My kingdom does not belong to this world." WE are called to live this truth, that our hearts do not belong to the THINGS of this world. This is not easy, but we have Brother Lawrence to guide us in this effort. Our 2nd reading says Jesus Christ has freed us from our sins by his blood and made US into a kingdom. That makes "US" the kingdom of God, a kingdom that grows when we expand our hearts through a focus on pleasing God.

The second part of "The Practice of the Presence of God" is to live each moment of our lives for the love of God. Brother Lawrence says, "God requires no great matters of us; a little remembrance of Him from time to time; a little adoration; sometimes to pray for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, and sometimes to return Him thanks for the favors He has given you, and to console yourself with Him as often as you can." Brother Lawrence shared his love for God in his kitchen where he fed the cart drivers, grocers and fisherman who stopped by and gave them his practical advice on how God really cared for their concerns. We are called to build the King's Kingdom through similar conversations with the people we meet.

My final question is, "What are the fruits of the practice of the presence of God?" Brother Lawrence, as he suffered from PTSD and religious scrupulosity, spent 10 years trying to find peace, thinking he was destined for damnation. Then, when he accepted that he might suffer for the rest of his life, his anxiety left him, and his life was changed forever. He says, "My soul, which, till that time was in trouble, felt a profound inward peace, as if she were in her center in a place of rest. Ever since that time I walk before God, simply, in faith, with humility, and with love; and I apply myself diligently to do nothing and think nothing which may displease God." The book says, "When he failed in his duty, he only confessed his fault, asked for God to hinder his falling and gave himself no further uneasiness about it." He was forgiven and his sin was forgotten.

I love Brother Lawrence's openness in this book and how it applies to the reality of the Christian faith journey that we all face. Brother Lawrence lets us inside his heart, to see his inner struggle as he navigates life, faith, and the mystery of God.

So, if you ask me the question, "Have you tried the Practice of the Presence of God Deacon Bill?" I would say, "I've read the book twice, so I don't have an excuse for not trying it."

My initial findings have been in the “patience” department as I try to do all things for the love of God. When I’m doing something annoying, like driving in heavy traffic or washing dishes, but do it consciously for the love of God, I don’t get as annoyed. When you do something for God, you don’t worry about why the traffic is so bad or whose turn it is to do the dishes. So far, this practice seems to help. For anyone out there who is trying to follow this practice I’d be curious to hear your feedback.

As we reflect on our God of the Universe, let’s open our hearts this week and take in the loving wisdom of Brother Lawrence. He has left us the gift of a way of life, simple and accessible, available to anyone who seeks to know God’s peace and presence, regardless of their age or circumstances. The cover of his book is printed in back of the church for anyone who wants to snap a photo of it.