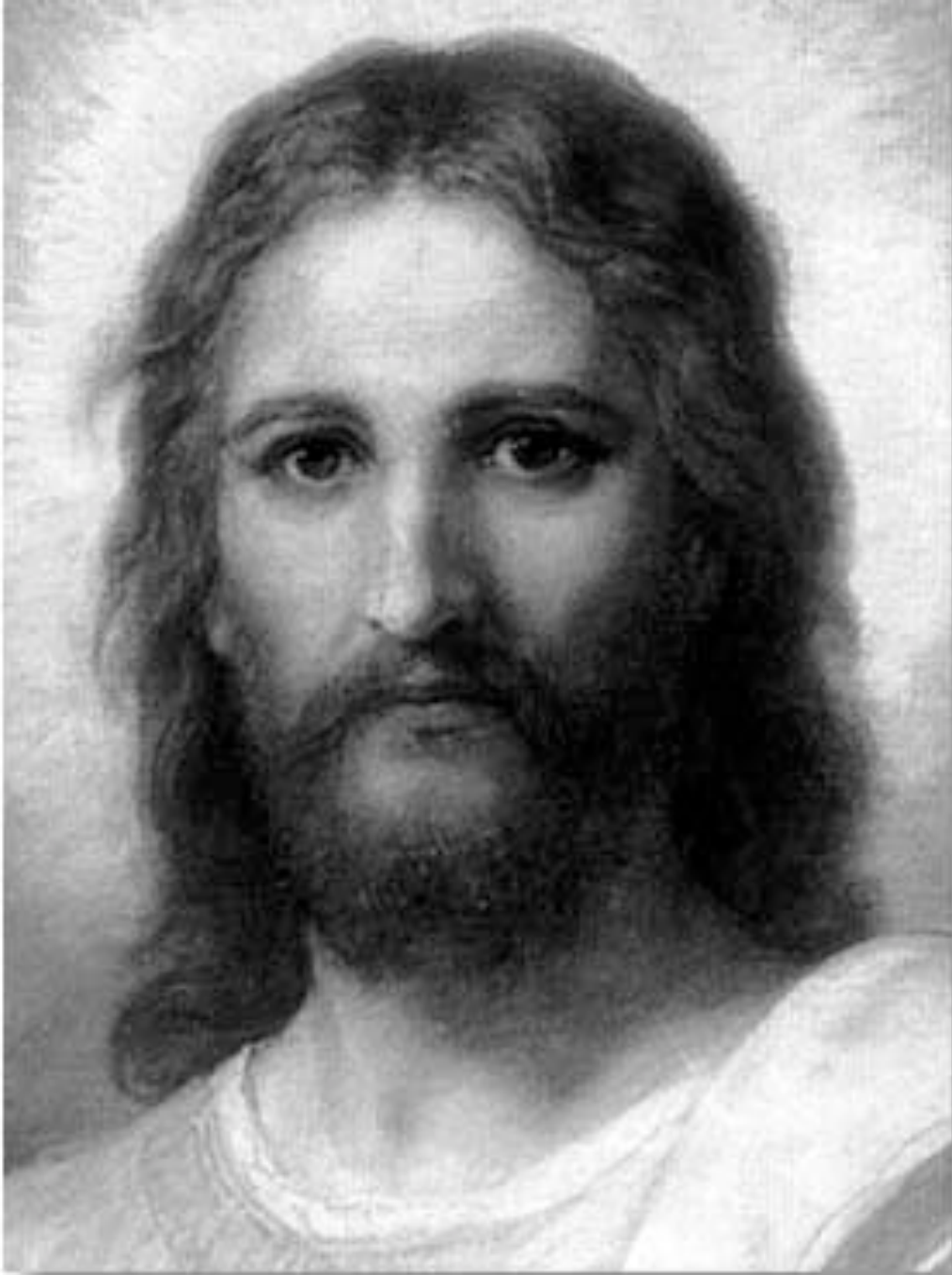


LOVE EMBRACING THE BELOVED



MEANS FOR ATTAINING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

**“IN THY PRESENCE IS FULLNESS OF JOY,
THE SIMPLICITY THAT IS CHRIST.”**

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This article contains the Spiritual Maxims of one Nicholas Herman of Lorraine, a lowly born and unlearned man; who, after having been a soldier and a footman, was admitted a lay brother among the Carmelites Deschausses (bare-footed) at Paris in 1666, where he served in the kitchen of the community. He was afterwards known by the name of Brother Lawrence. He died in February 1691, at the advanced age of eighty, after a life the true saintliness of which can be well realised from his words of guidance.¹

“Herein you will not find set out a devotion which is merely speculative, or which can only be practiced in a cloister. No, there is an obligation laid on every man to worship God and to love Him, and we cannot carry out this solemn duty as we ought, unless our heart is knit in love to God, and our communion is so close as to constrain us to run to Him at every moment, just like little children, who cannot stand upright without their mother’s arms of love.”

Brother Lawrence, an earnest seeker of God, had a transforming experience at the age of 18. He was a changed person since then and till the last day of his life he was in commune with God to whom he surrendered himself entirely. His experience, and thus his guidance has a special significance as the theme is universal, and so is the endeavor to practice the Presence of God. The practice or *sadhana* explained herein is referred to thus in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*; (I-23): “*Isvarapranidhanadva*”.

Brother Lawrence thus sought “Goodness”, in the highest sense of the word proclaimed by his Lord Jesus: “Only God is Good.” It is necessary to be good, but the good must then progress on to become godlike, to be a deva, a “shining one” filled with the Divine Light. Fixing their mind on God they make themselves living offerings. That is why the *Manu Smriti* (Laws of Manu) says that the greatest sacrifice is the offering of ourselves (*purushamedha*). And Patanjali says: “Samadhi is attained by offering our lives to God (*Isvarapranidhana*).”

God is the essence and the apex of Consciousness, so Patanjali further says: “In Him is the highest limit of omniscience.” (*Yoga Sutras* 1:25) In seeking constant abidance with this highest limit of omniscience, Brother Lawrence eventually abandoned all previously set devotions except those prescribed to his station within the Carmelite Society. Often he said: “All that he had heard others say, all that he had found in books, all that he had himself written, seemed savorless, dull and heavy, when compared with what faith had unfolded to him of the unspeakable riches of God and of Jesus Christ. He alone can reveal Himself to us; we toil and exercise our mind in reason and in science, forgetting that therein we can see only a copy, whilst we neglect to gaze on the Incomparable Original. In the depths of our soul, God reveals Himself, could we

¹ Paraphrased from the Preface of *The Practice of the Presence of God, the Complete Book*, by Brother Lawrence, Samata Books – Madras 1987. Almost the entirety of this article is either paraphrased or directly quoted from this same publication.

but realize it, yet we will not look there for Him. We leave Him to spend our time in fooleries, and affect disdain at commune with Him, Who is ever present, Who is our King.”

Not only did Brother Lawrence perceive God as present in his soul by faith, but also in all events of life, whensoever they befell, instantly he could arise and seek the Presence of God. Yet he confessed that it was hard at first, that many a time he had been unmindful of this practice, but that, after humble prayer and confession to God of his failure, he had betaken himself to it again without trouble.

Of his life within God, his failures and attainments, he left a legacy of direction for those who would likewise seek “The Way, the Truth, and the Light (Life) in the Presence of God.” Thus his declaration most central to this undertaking was: “That the Presence of God can be reached rather by the heart and by love than by understanding. In the way of God *thoughts* count for little, love is everything.”

“We search for stated ways and methods of learning how to love God, and to come to that love we disquiet our minds by I know not how many devices; we give ourselves a world of trouble and pursue a multitude of practices to attain to a sense of the Presence of God. And yet it is so simple. How very much shorter it is and easier to do our common business purely for the love of God, to set His consecrating mark on all we lay our hands to, and thereby to foster the sense of His abiding Presence by communion of our heart with His! There is no need either of art or science; just as we are, we can go to Him, simply and with a single heart.”

He no longer perplexed himself with thoughts of virtue, or of his salvation. He entirely forgot self; he never any longer thought of heaven or hell or his past sins or his deeds of striving for goodness and compassion. In the Presence of God he entered upon a perfect peace; after which he commended himself to God, as he used to say: “For life and for death, for time and for eternity – For we are *made for* God, and for Him alone.”

His one method of going to God and abiding in His Presence was *to do all for the love of Him*.

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When we enter upon spiritual life, we ought to consider thoroughly what we are, probing to the very depth. Though creatures made for God, we are prone to all manner of maladies and subject to countless infirmities, which distress us and impair the soul’s health, rendering us wavering and unstable in our humors and dispositions. We must believe steadfastly, never once doubting, that all such is from God and for our good; that it is God’s will to visit us therein.

“Good when he gives, supremely good;
Nor less when He denies.
Afflictions, from His sovereign hand,
Are blessings in disguise.”

Sri Ramana Maharshi, also declared this truth in conversation with Paramahansa Yogananda, evidenced in *Talks 107*:

Swami Yogananda: “Why does God permit suffering in the world? Should He not with His omnipotence do away with it at one stroke and ordain the universal realisation of God?”

Maharshi: “Suffering is the way for Realisation of God.”

Swami Yogananda: “Should He not ordain differently?”

Maharshi: “*It is the way.*”

Brother Lawrence entreats us that we: “Must do all things thoughtfully and soberly, without impetuosity or precipitancy, with denotes a mind undisciplined. We must go about our labors quietly, calmly, and lovingly, entreating Him to prosper the works of our hands; thus keeping heart and mind fixed on God.

Sri Ramana Maharshi echoed this same truth when saying in *Talks #91*: “The nature of the mind to wander. One must bring one’s thoughts to bear on God. By long practice the mind is controlled and made steady.”

“That useless thoughts spoil all: that the mischief began there; but that we ought to be diligent to reject them as soon as we perceived their impertinence to the matter at hand, or to our salvation; and return to our communion with God. When we are busied, as well as while meditating on spiritual things, even in our time of set devotion, whilst our voice is rising in prayer, we ought to cease for one brief moment, as often as we can, to worship God in the depths of our being, to taste Him though it be in passing, to touch Him though as it were by stealth. Since you cannot but know that God is with you in all you undertake, that He is at the very depth and center of your soul, why should you not thus pause an instant from time to time in your outward business, and even in the act of prayer, to worship Him with your soul, to praise Him, to entreat His aid, to offer Him the service of your heart, and give Him thanks for all His loving-kindness and tender-mercies?”

Brother Lawrence emphasizes that necessity is laid upon us to examine ourselves with diligence and to find out what are the virtues, which we chiefly lack, and which are the hardest for us to acquire. We should seek to learn the failures in virtue that most

easily beset us, and the times and occasions, and through which associations we do most often fall. For the world, and association within it, is fraught with danger. So much so that reliance upon God's grace is paramount.

“A soul is more dependant on grace, the higher the perfection to which it aspires; and the grace of God is the more needful for each moment, as without it the soul can do nothing. The world, the flesh and the association with evil join forces and assault the soul so straitly and so untiringly that, without humble reliance on the ever-present aid of God, they drag the soul down in spite of all resistance. Thus to rely seems hard to nature, but grace makes it become easy, and brings with it joy.”

In this same regard, *Sanatana Dharma* entreats us to “Seek *satsanga*...while abandoning *dussanga*.” (*Narada Bhakti Sutras II: 42,43*) A proper understanding of the *Sanskrit* words *satsanga* (good association) and *dussanga* (evil association) is essential. Especially when applying them not only in the context of worldly associations, but as is more precisely scripturally intended, to associations *within* the mind. Here the spiritual maxim: “As above, so below... As without, so within” is applicable.

While good association with others enables one to develop purity (*sattwa*) and is the gateway to Liberation, evil association intensifies distraction and inertia (*rajas* and *tamas*), and is the gateway to hellish conditions in life. But even more harmful to the soul is the *effect* of evil association. There is nothing so disastrous in an aspirant's life as when evil association nourishes the mental impurities of anger, hate, greed, pride, egoism, selfishness, hypocrisy and passion. Once these mental impurities become strong through external nourishment, they become formidable enemies of the soul in and of themselves. They then no longer need to rely on external sustenance, for through mainly memory, imagination and fantasy they, as Brother Lawrence warns us, “assault the soul untiringly.”



The Spiritual Maxims of Brother Lawrence systematically guides us through the means for attaining unto the Presence of God.

1. The first is a great purity of life; in guarding ourselves with care lest we should do or say or think on anything, which might be displeasing to God.

2. Second is a great faithfulness in the practice of His Presence, and in keeping the soul's gaze fixed on God in faith, calmly, humbly, lovingly, without allowing an entrance to anxious cares and disquietude.

3. Make it your study, before taking up any task to look to God, be it only for a moment, as also when you are engaged thereon, and lastly when you have performed the same. And forasmuch as without time and patience this practice cannot be attained, be not disheartened at your many falls; truly this habit can only be formed with difficulty, yet when it is so formed, how great will be your joy therein.

4. Let us mark well, however, that this intercourse with God is held in the depth of our being; there it is that the soul speaks to God, heart to heart, and over the soul thus holding converse there steals a great and profound peace. All that passes without concerns the soul no more than a fire of straw, which the more it flares, the sooner burns itself out; and rarely indeed do the cares of the world ever intrude to trouble the peace that is within.

5. It is here therefore, in the heart, that we ought to strive to make a habit of this gaze on God; but that which is needful to bring the heart to this obedience we must do, as has been said, quite simply, without strain or study.

6. When the mind, for lack of discipline when first engaged in this practice, has contracted bad habits of wandering and dissipation, such habits are difficult to overcome, and commonly draw us, even against our will, to things of earth. One remedy for this is to humbly offer prayer to God. A multiplicity of words in prayer is not advised; discursive forms of prayer are often an occasion for wandering.

7. One way to recall easily the mind in time of prayer, and to preserve it more in rest, is not to let it wander too far at other times.

8. This practice of the Presence of God is somewhat hard at the outset, yet, pursued faithfully, it works imperceptibly within the soul most marvelous effects; it draws down God's grace abundantly, and leads the soul insensibly to the ever-present vision of God, loving and beloved, which is the most spiritual and most real, the most free and most life-giving manner of prayer.

9. Remember that to attain this state, we must control the senses, inasmuch as no soul, which takes delight in earthly things above those in their Creator, can find full joy in the Presence of God; to be with Him we must leave behind the creature.

Thus, Brother Lawrence compassionately entreats us to 'seek and find', to 'knock and the door will be opened unto us', for his final guidance is:

“All things are possible to him who *believes*, they are less difficult to him who *hopes*, they are easier to him who *loves*, and still more easy to him who practices and perseveres in these three virtues...

Believe me, count as lost each day you have not used in loving God.”

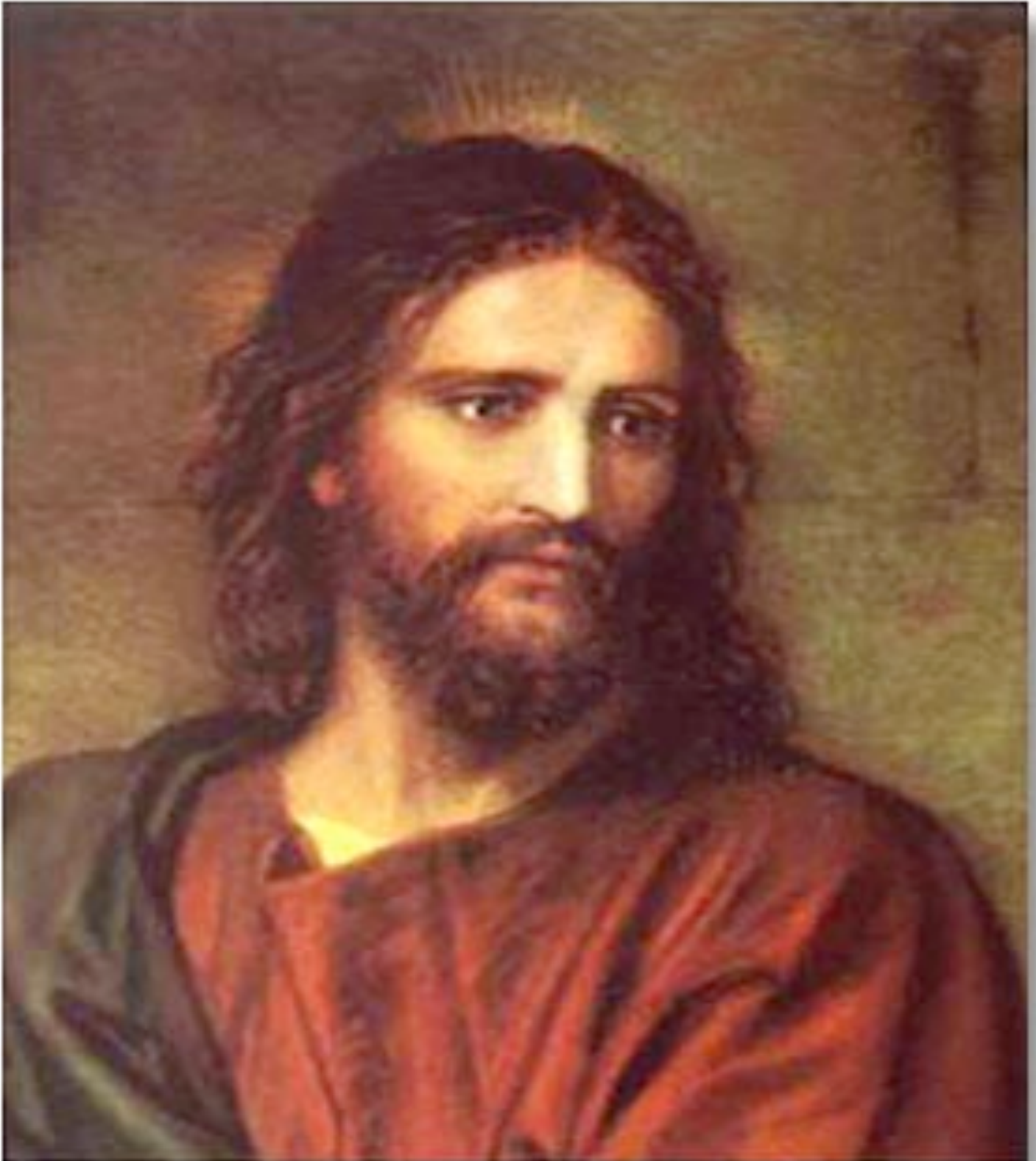
Just prior to the final moment when this lover of the Beloved passed away in the embrace of His Lord, a brother asked him if he was at ease and what his mind was busied with? He said: “I am doing what I shall do, through all eternity – blessing God, praising God, adoring God, giving him the love of my whole heart. It is our one business, my brethren, to worship Him and love Him, without thought of anything else.”

The brethren then begged him to entreat of God for them to possess the true spirit of prayer. Brother Lawrence, without pain or struggle, without losing in the slightest the use of any of his faculties, in perfect peace and calm replied:

“There was need of labor on his part also to make himself worthy of such a gift.”

These were his last words.





“Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing.
In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of
God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18