

Faith Story: Brother Lawrence

Last week's Faith Story took us to the 12th century to visit with Hildegard in Germany's Rhineland. This morning, we advance to 17th century France to meet a humble lay brother who has been influential in Christian spiritual practices from his day to our own.

In 1611, Nicholas Herman was born in Lorraine, France to a poor, but devout, peasant couple. Like many young men in need of a steady source of food and shelter, he joined the army, but he did not have a successful military career. Nicholas had not been a soldier for long when he was captured and ill-treated by German adversaries. They eventually released him, but in a subsequent battle against Swedish forces, he was injured badly enough to leave him with a permanent limp. Giving up on military service, Nicholas secured a position as a footman to the King's treasurer, but was unsuccessful in that endeavor as well, later describing himself as "a clumsy fellow who used to break everything."

When he was 18, around the time he joined the army, Nicholas had an experience of spiritual awakening which had a profound and life-long impact. He later spoke of this experience as God having given him a singular, remarkable grace when "one winter's day he saw a tree stripped of its leaves and considered that sometime afterward these leaves would appear anew, followed by flowers and fruit. He then received a lofty awareness of the providence and power of God which never left him. This awareness detached him entirely from the world and gave him" an overwhelming love for God.

That love for and focus on God resulted in Nicholas feeling a growing discomfort in the world and a strong revulsion over the "vanity of the age", evidence of which was all around him in France during the reign of the Sun King, Louis XIV.

In 1649, Nicolas presented himself as a candidate in the Order of Discalced or "Barefoot" Carmelites in Paris, which was one of the most austere of the monastic communities. The members devoted themselves to prayer and contemplation and committed themselves to absolute poverty. Their refusal to wear shoes was intended to express reverence, humiliation, poverty, and penance, and the brothers wore sandals or went completely barefoot.

And so, at the age of 38, Nicholas Herman became Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a lay brother of the Discalced Carmelites. He found in that community an intention that strongly appealed to him: the absolute negation of everything that does not come from God.

Brother Lawrence was assigned to work in the kitchen as a cook and dishwasher. While this work did not in any way appeal to him, it was in the monastery kitchen that he developed the spiritual practice which has brought him to the attention of subsequent generations of Christians -- the practice of remaining continuously and intentionally in the presence of God.



One biographer writes of Lawrence that: In his early days in the Religious Life, he often spent his entire prayer time rejecting stray thoughts and falling back into them again. (I expect that many of us can relate to that difficulty). In fact, Lawrence confessed, he found many of the prescribed devotions confusing and distracting and had never been able to pray within the confines of a conventional monastic rule; more often than not, after the required time of meditation he could not say what it had been about.

His solution to this difficulty was a simple one: he developed the habit of continual conversation with God. Whether at prayer or at work, it became his practice to focus his heart and mind on God, offering thanks and praise, confessing where he had failed or fallen, and asking for God's grace to do whatever had to be done.

Thus, despite his natural aversion to his assigned kitchen tasks, he determined to do them prayerfully, which led to him settling into what he described as "great ease in doing things" during his daily routine.

The reason we know today about this humble 17th century lay brother who devoted his days to sweeping floors and washing cooking pots is because word spread within the church about his practice and the local cardinal sent his envoy to interview Brother Lawrence. That envoy recorded their conversations, which along with a few pages of *Maxims* which Lawrence had written down over the years and sixteen letters between Lawrence and various correspondents, have been printed and reprinted and reprinted again under the title *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a small but mighty book which remains a devotional classic.

For Brother Lawrence, "common business", no matter how mundane or routine, was the medium of God's love. Rather than dwelling on the sacredness or worldliness of a task, he focused on the motivation behind it, saying: "Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do ... We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of [God], and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself to worship before God, who has given me grace to work; afterwards, I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God."

While Brother Lawrence's practice might seem simple, it is a profound reorientation of life and thought, which, in the face of the world's demands for our attention and allegiance, requires great strength of purpose and deep reliance upon grace. Lawrence himself conceded that he spent years disciplining his heart and mind to yield continually to God's steadfast presence. Eventually, he reached the place where his soul "had come to its own house and place of rest". By persevering, he found great peace for himself and bequeathed a great gift to his fellow Christians.

Works Consulted:

- *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*; published by *Christian History Magazine*; p. 271-273
- Brother Lawrence; *The Practice of the Presence of God*; translated by Robert J. Edmonson; biographical sketch by Hal M. Helms
- Christian History Institute website
- Ministry Magazine website; www.ministrymagazine.org
- Relevant; www.relevantmagazine.com
- Renovare website; "A Holy Inactivity: Brother Lawrence"