

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Presence

When I was a teenager, I spent one summer washing dishes at Gifford's Ice Cream Parlor, in Silver Spring, Maryland. I can still remember the relentless aroma of melting ice cream mingling with the soapy scent of dishwashing detergent.

I couldn't eat ice cream all summer. The thought of it made me queasy. Thankfully, I recovered. Ice cream isn't a problem anymore (except when it comes to my belt size).

Anyway, I had reason to remember that summer when I picked up a copy of *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by the esteemed Carmelite known only as Brother Lawrence. This slender volume of letters and meditations was written hundreds of years ago by a humble friar whose most exalted work involved toiling in the monastery kitchen. He didn't preach, or write scholarly books of theology, or climb the ladder of the hierarchy to become a bishop.

He simply did the dishes.

"In the noise and clatter of my kitchen," he wrote, "while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."

Oddly, I never felt that way in the kitchen at Gifford's. But back then, praying before the Eucharist was not high on my list of adolescent priorities. Is it possible to "possess God in great tranquility" while going about the business of everyday life?

Brother Lawrence thought so. What he understood was the importance of practice—"the *practice* of the presence of God."

We only realize He is with us when we work at it—when we are open to Him or when we actively seek Him. God doesn't announce His arrival with a fanfare of trumpet blasts; He whispers, and is with us.

To draw near to God, I think, we need to do more than to let **Him** be present to **us**. We also need to make **ourselves** present to **Him**. Love, at least in relationship with another, is a two-way street.

And that sort of presence takes practice. It takes commitment. It takes a continuing awareness of God's work in the world and in our lives—and a heartfelt appreciation for every blessing, and every burden, that signifies somehow **Emmanuel**: God with us.

Five centuries ago, Brother Lawrence had already mastered that kind of presence and tried to share his mastery of the mystery. His little book is his legacy, a classic of its kind, and one well worth reading today. His secret? "I apply myself diligently to do nothing and think nothing which will displease Him," he wrote. "I hope when I have done what I can, He will do with me what he pleases."

It sounds so simple. But the challenge is huge. It is the work of a lifetime—which, thirty years ago, was the way I felt about washing dishes at an ice cream parlor.

But the benefits of the work described by Brother Lawrence will last longer.

And the smell is infinitely sweeter.

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