

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614-1691)

Fourth Centenary of his birth

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During the General Chapter held in Avila in 2009, the friars asked that in the year 2014 and in the shadow of the approaching fifth centenary of the birth of our mother Teresa of Jesus, we commemorate the fourth centenary of the birth of one of her spiritual sons, born in 1614, a humble lay brother, humble, but very much loved by many Christians in the entire world, and even non-Christians: Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. His simple writings, timely and luminous, have been translated into many languages and edited many times up to now.

In 1991, on the occasion of the third centenary of his death, our brother Camilo Maccise, superior general at the time, wrote a remarkable letter on the spirituality and mission of Brother Lawrence (cf. Acta OCD, 1991-1992, pp. 451-458). I would also like to speak briefly about this son of Carmel beginning with the two major periods of his life, both of which are significant: First of all, “the young layman,” Nicolas Herman (his civil name), and then the Lay Brother OCD, Lawrence of the Resurrection.

1. Nicolas Herman, Young Layman

Already from a simple human and Christian perspective, this first period of his life is meaningful for us who walk in the light of Christ and of Carmel, whether we are seculars or religious.

In 1614, on an uncertain date, Nicolas was baptized in the humble Church of the little village of Hérménil in Lorraine, at that time an independent Grand Duchy, now part of France. We know hardly anything about his family background and of his education in this rural environment. However, an event marked there his entire life. One winter day, at the age of eighteen, while contemplating a tree stripped of its leaves, and reflecting on the cosmic reawakening that takes place in nature every spring, Nicolas was seized by a profound sense of the Divine Presence and of Divine Providence, the source of life that never ceases to reveal itself. His intellect was filled with an entirely new light, an awakened faith. God became close, present in all things. This experience of the living God would engrave itself in the depths of his soul.

Life was difficult in the Lorraine of his time, involved in the terrible Thirty Year’s War which was so destructive, murderous, and immoral. Nicolas enlisted in the army of the Grand Duchy. In this gravely troubled period, his soul lost the beautiful vision he had discovered at eighteen. Later on, he would grieve over the sins he had committed, without revealing exactly what they were. Several times he peered into the eyes of death. In 1635, he was seriously wounded during the siege of the town of Rambervilliers that the Duke of Lorraine tried to reconquer. Nicolas was brought back to his native village. While his body was restored, his soul also slowly recovered.

Some time later, he met a hermit and decided to share his solitary life. But this was not his path. Yes, he intuited the value of a life wholly given to God, but the spring of prayer didn’t flow as he has had dreamed. He moved to Paris where we find him at the service of a prominent man. But that was not what God was asking of him either.

Let us remain a few moments with Nicolas our young laymen. Through difficult circumstances he had come “to know life and the world.” In the struggle for life, he had survived through the upheaval of a long and terrible war, the irritation and helplessness of many anguishing situations, and the experience of poverty and famine. He had also discovered the weakness of his human nature, of his “sins” of which he was humbly conscious for the rest of his life, as had been his spiritual mother St. Teresa of Jesus before him.

But love would triumph. Nicolas would not merit the reproach of the Angel of the Apocalypse. “I hold this against you; you have lost the love you had at first.” (Rev. 2:4) A soldier, wounded, an immigrant and a laborer, the young layman would rediscover the luminous flame of the divine Presence he had experienced at eighteen years of age. There in the midst his struggles, a Christian and Carmelite soul slowly developed in him. He opened unconditionally to God, to his grace, and to his concrete desires.

Nicolas remains an example of a spiritual awakening and a slow resurrection: for each of us a silent reminder and a gentle invitation.

II. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection

In Paris Nicolas Herman met the large and fervent community of Discalced Carmelite Friars of St. Joseph’s convent located on Rue de Vaugirard. In June of 1640, at 26 years of age, he entered as a “lay brother” (“frater donates” according to the Constitutions and received the habit two months later. At that time the habit of the lay brothers differed from that of the cleric brothers. The lay brother’s habit lacked the capuche and the white mantle. The lay brothers also sat in the last places in the refectory and the choir. Nonetheless, they received a Carmelite name and title: henceforth Nicolas was called Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection.

After two months of postulancy and two years of novitiate, on the 14th of August 1642, the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Lawrence, now 28 years old, pronounced his perpetual vows as a “lay brother.” The Constitutions of the Order (Const. edition 1631, section II, ch. 4) stipulated that the “non-cleric” brothers should be “devout, simple, faithful, and devoted to work since they are called to work.” They had no vote in the conventual chapter nor did they participate in the recitation of the Divine Office. When they could not be present at the hours of mental prayer because of their domestic duties, they prayed at other times indicated by the superior, often in the evening or during the night. (cf. Const., section I, ch. 4)

They assumed, therefore, a lot of manual work and we find our brother Lawrence as cook of the large community, then as cobbler, and often as helper in the Church, (For example, he served the numerous Masses of the priest friars because Eucharistic Concelebration did not exist at that time.) He was also seen on the street doing errands and sometimes begging for alms. He was even sent to the Burgundy and Auvergne regions to shop for provisions.

A Difficult Beginning, then Great Joy

Here, therefore, was Nicolas Herman catapulted into a new environment; a major change as we can all recall in our lives whether secular or religious: a move, a new employment, a new work situation and change in living conditions, insertion into a new community, family,

or social life. Brother Lawrence did not rush blindly into this new life with new challenges, people and duties. He knew that God's grace was waiting for him and he wanted to give himself unconditionally to God. To a religious he knew well, he wrote, (speaking in the third person): *"His principal concern throughout the more than forty years he has been in religious life has been always to be with God, and to do, say, or think nothing that could displease him. He has no other interest than the pure love of God."*

However, to a religious priest, apparently his confessor and spiritual advisor who is "fully aware" of his "great miseries," as well as the "great graces with which God has favored" his soul, he recalls:

On my entrance into religious life I made the resolution to give myself entirely to God in atonement for my sins, and to renounce everything else for the sake of his love. During the first years I ordinarily thought about death, judgment, hell, paradise, and my sins when I prayed. I continued in this fashion for a few years, carefully applying myself the rest of the day – even during my work – to the practice of the presence of God who was always near me, often in the very depths of my heart. This gave me a great reverence for God, and in this matter faith alone was my reassurance. I gradually did the same thing during mental prayer, and this gave me great joy and consolation. This is how I began.

However there was a painful side to his spiritual experience:

I will admit that during the first ten years I suffered a great deal. The apprehension that I did not belong to God as I wished, my past sins always before my eyes, and the lavish graces God was giving me, were the sum and substance of all my woes. During this period I fell often, but I got back up just as quickly. It seemed to me that all creatures, reason, and God himself were against me, and that faith alone was on my side. I was sometimes troubled by thoughts that this was the result of my presumption, in that I pretended to be all at once where others were able to arrive only with difficulty. Other times I thought I was willingly damning myself, that there was no salvation for me. When I accepted the fact that I might spend my life suffering from these troubles and anxieties – which in no way diminished the trust I had in God and served only to increase my faith – I suddenly found myself changed all at once. And my soul, until that time always in turmoil, experienced a deep inner peace as if it had found its center and place of rest.

From this letter we can clearly deduce that Brother Lawrence, who had been in "religious life for more than forty years," went through an intense night of the soul for the "first ten years" of his religious life, and then "for thirty years," he experienced deep spiritual joys he wrote in a letter to the religious sister previously mentioned. This letter informs us of his constant "practice" of God's Presence and its happy effects:

He is now so accustomed to this divine presence that he receives constant help in every situation. For about thirty years his soul has been enjoying such great and continual inner consolations that he can hardly contain them. If occasionally he becomes too forgetful of this divine presence, God makes himself known immediately in his soul to call him back to himself; this often happens when he is most engaged in his activities. He responds with complete fidelity to this inner call: either by lifting up his heart toward God, by gently and lovingly turning inward, or by a few words that love formulates during these encounters... These experiences make him so certain that God is always in the depths of his soul, that he has no doubts about it, no matter what he may do or what may happen.

The Spirit of Carmel

Let us note that in entering Carmel Brother Lawrence found a fervent community where the spirit of the Teresian Reform was alive. In Paris the confreres of Brother Lawrence had translated the works of holy mother Teresa and of John of the Cross. Through sermons and conferences, or in counsels from his superiors and confessors, our cook would have often heard the words of our mother St. Teresa reminding us that we must not become discouraged “when obedience calls us to attend to exterior things: if it is in the kitchen, know that the Lord walks among the pots and pans. He will help you interiorly and exteriorly...Moreover, the true lover loves everywhere and is always thinking of the Beloved!...When we are involved in activity, even though these works are done obedience and charity, do not neglect to turn interiorly towards God.” (Foundations, ch. 5)

In the search for the harmonious and fruitful union of contemplation and action, our brother Lawrence, very active and deeply contemplative, has a message for everyone: Carmelite friars, students, our contemplative sisters, indeed for all Christians, lay or religious, whenever we are called to daily work and to apostolic service, be it humble and hidden, or outstanding and appreciated.

The Man and the Guide

In order to know Brother Lawrence, nothing is better than to read his “Spiritual Maxims” and “Letters.” Recently the authentic texts of his writings have providentially been discovered. We find in Brother Lawrence an intelligent and utterly honest man. He was a clear thinker and went to the essential. His doctrine is founded on faith, and at the same time, comes from a profound experience of God. His word is simple but convincing. What he says is always sensible and meaningful. As he said, sometimes he consulted “books” because he never neglected to nourish himself on spiritual reading. He had an open heart and an upright nature. He was humorous and didn’t beat around the bush.

He had renowned friends who highly esteemed him. The future biographer of Brother Lawrence, Joseph of Beaufort, vicar general of Bishop Antoine de Noailles (Bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne and later Cardinal of Paris, with Beaufort again as vicar general) often consulted Brother and recalled what our mystic cook told him during his first visit: “God gives light to those who have an authentic desire to be with him, and that if I had this intention, I could ask to see him whenever I wanted without fear of bothering him, and if not, I ought not to come to see him at all.”

According to some witnesses, Lawrence had a rough exterior, but not in an impolite manner, but direct, like someone from the country or a simple worker. He was not fond of compliments and beautiful formulas. Beaufort sketched a portrait of his good “starets.” “Brother Lawrence’s virtue never made him unsociable. His heart was open, eliciting confidence, letting you feel you could tell him anything, and you had found a friend. For his part, once he knew who he was dealing with, he spoke freely and showed great kindness. What he said was simple, yet always on target, and full of common sense. Once you got past his rough exterior you discovered an unusual wisdom, a freedom beyond the reach of a poor lay brother, an insight that extended far beyond what you would expect.” And again: “He had the best heart in the world. His good appearance, his human and affable air, his simple and modest manner readily won the esteem and high regard of all those who saw him. The more you spoke to him, the more you discovered in him an depth of uprightness and piety that you hardly encountered elsewhere...He was not one of those people who never bend and who regard holiness as incompatible with an honest way of looking at life. He never put on

airs, got along with everyone and acted kindly with his brothers and friends, always identifying with them.”

The great Fenelon, another admirer of our mystic cook, personally knew him and witnessed: “The words of the saints themselves are quite different from the lectures of those who try to depict them. Saint Catherine of Genoa was a prodigious of love. Brother Lawrence was rough by nature yet sensitive by grace. I saw him and I had an excellent conversation with him about death, while he was very ill and yet quite cheerful.” In addressing Bossuet during the subtle disputes about true mysticism, he wrote: “We can learn every day by studying God’s ways in the lives of unlearned people who have experience. For example, we could not have learned about the practice by conversing with the good Brother Lawrence?”

Some principle ideas of his teaching

Without stopping to consider his theological life of awakened faith, unshakable confidence and unconditional charity, let us listen to Brother Lawrence communicate his strong and mature convictions, such as we find in his “Letters” and “Spiritual Maxims.”

- **A long and personal experience** persuaded our brother that the practice of the Presence of God is an excellent way to intensify our union with God. To his spiritual guide, he explained, as we read, how after ten years his prayer evolved from a more meditative prayer to an affectionate contact with the Lord, present “in the depths of my heart.” This affectionate contact was then continued during “the rest of the day and even during my work.” He continued:

I felt neither sadness nor doubt about my state since I have no will other than the will of God, which I try to carry out in all things and to which I am so surrendered that I would not so much as pick up a straw from the ground against his order, nor for any other reason than pure love. I gave up all devotions and prayers that were not required and I devote myself exclusively to remaining always in his holy presence. I keep myself in his presence by simple attentiveness and a general loving awareness of God that I call “actual presence of God” or better, a quiet and secret exchange of the soul with God that is hardly every interrupted. This sometimes results in interior, and often exterior, contentment and joys that are so great that I have a hard time keeping them under control and from showing them outwardly.

- From this time Lawrence became a true prophet and apostle of the way of the Presence of God. He wrote to a nun:

If I were a preacher, I would preach nothing but the practice of the presence of God; and if I were a spiritual director, I would recommend it to everyone, for I believe there is nothing as necessary or as easy. I feel that the entire spiritual life consists in this and it seems to me that in practicing it as we should, we will become spiritual in a short time.

- However, without effort we do not obtain very much. Already upon entering Carmel, Lawrence considered that we must “**give all to obtainAll.**” In order to learn to live “die ac nocte,” day and night in the Will and the Presence of God, as the Rule of Carmel invites us to, we must have this “determinada determinación” of which St. Teresa of Jesus spoke. Brother Lawrence, spiritual son of Teresa of Jesus and of John of the Cross, doesn’t think otherwise. In the letter cited above, he said:

I know that to do this your heart must be empty of all other things because God desires to possess it exclusively, and since he cannot possess it exclusively without first emptying it of everything other than himself; neither can he act within it nor do there what he pleases, if we do not abandon it entirely to him for his good pleasure.

But he continues, union with God sought out of pure love will become a source of great happiness.

There is no way of life in the world more agreeable or delightful than continual conversation with God; only those who practice and experience it can understand this.

- This practice of the Presence of God **must therefore be learned, and perhaps be relearned throughout life**. Lawrence confessed that he also had difficulties in the beginning.

I had much trouble doing this exercise, but continued in spite of all the difficulties I encountered, without getting disturbed or anxious when I was involuntarily distracted. I was as faithful to this practice during my activities as I was during my periods of mental prayer. (...) even in the most intense periods of my work. (...) This is what I have practiced since I entered religious life. Although I have practiced it feebly and imperfectly, I have nonetheless received many advantages from it. (...) So, by repeating these acts they become familiar, and the practice of the presence of God becomes more natural.

Therefore, learning to practice the Presence is progressive but faithful. As a good teacher, here is Lawrence's tactful and perspective counsel to a lady:

This good God does not ask a great deal of us: a brief remembrance from time to time, a brief act of adoration, at times requesting his grace, at other times offering him your sufferings, finding comfort in him. During your meals and conversations, occasionally lift up your heart to him; the least little remembrance of him will always be most pleasing to him. You need not shout out: he is closer to us than we may think. We do not always have to be in church to be with God. We can make of our hearts an oratory where we can withdraw from time to time to converse with him there, gently, humbly, and lovingly. Everyone is capable of these familiar conversations with God, some more, some less. God knows of what we are capable.

- Little by little **the will and the habit** of turning frequently to God's presence will be formed in us. He recommends to us:

A great fidelity to the practice of this presence and to the fostering of this awareness of God within, which must always be carried out gently, humbly, and lovingly... We must take special care that this inner awareness, however brief, precedes our activities somewhat, that it accompanies them from time to time, and that we complete all of them with it. Since much time and effort are required to acquire this practice, we must not become discouraged when we fail. For the habit is only formed with effort, yet once it is formed we will find contentment in everything.

- To what a profound union with God does Brother Lawrence wants to lead us! For the faithful soul, he opens beautiful and happy perspectives:

This (practice of the presence) of God, somewhat difficult in the beginning, secretly accomplishes marvelous effects in the soul, draws abundant graces from the Lord, and when practiced faithfully, imperceptibly leads it to this simple attentiveness, to this loving awareness of God present everywhere, which is the holiest, the surest, the easiest, and the most efficacious form of prayer. By turning inward and practicing the presence of God, the soul becomes so intimate with God that it spends practically all its life in continual acts of love, adoration, contrition, trust, thanksgiving, oblation, petition, and all the most excellent virtues. Sometimes it even becomes one continuous act, because the soul is in constant communion with this divine presence.

Three months before his death, our brother wrote:

What consoles me in this life is that I see God by faith. And I see him in such a way that it could make me say sometimes: "I don't believe anymore, I see. I experience what faith teaches us." On this assurance and this practice of faith, I will live and I will die with him. (And again, in speaking of "confidence") We could never have too much in such a good and faithful friend who will never let us down, either in this world or in the next.

- Having evoked such a luminous horizon, Lawrence addresses to us this **last encouragement**, on which we will finish our little anthology.

I know that few persons reach this advanced state. It is a grace God bestows only on a few chosen souls, since this simple awareness remains ultimately a gift from his kind hand. But let me say, for the consolation of those who want to embrace this holy practice, that he ordinarily gives it to souls who are disposed to receive it. If he does not give it, we can at least acquire, with the help of ordinary grace, a manner and state of prayer that greatly resembles this simple awareness, by means of this practice of the presence of God.

A Providential Discovery of the Writings of Brother Lawrence

Regarding the writings of Lawrence, until now we have only had at our disposal the printed text edited in 1691 by the Abbé of Beaufort. This is the text that readers and authors have depended on until the present. However, quite providentially, a manuscript of 1745 was discovered containing the transcription of the writings of some religious authors of the 17th century, ending with the Letters and Spiritual Maxims of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection.

This will be the subject of a new critical edition of the texts of Brother Lawrence. Our brother will come forward looking more true, free, and "Teresian." This will reveal the hagiographical style of Abbé Joseph de Beaufort typical of his time. This doesn't lessen the great gratitude we owe to Abbé de Beaufort. Without him we would not have known this simple lay brother. He quickly understood the spiritual riches of the mystical cook he had known for a quarter of a century. He also understood the importance of his doctrine and the apostolic influence that his writings and the example he could give. Lawrence is a prophet of the Sun of God who enlightens our life, provided that we prefer not to remain in the shadow.

The Mission of Brother Lawrence continues

Brother Lawrence occupies a privileged place in the heart of a number of seekers of God throughout the world, including our Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox brothers and sisters. Many Christians love him, listen to him, and revere him as a luminous guide and an authentic saint. By his life in the Sun of God and his radiant witness, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, true son of Carmel, continues today his beneficial action. By his simplicity and love, he leads us to God, present in our entire life. Let's not hesitate to get to know him.

On the Feast of the Glorious Cross, Rome, September 14, 2014

Father Saverio Cannistrá, O.C.D. Superior General