

***The Practice of the Presence of God: Critical Edition.* By Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Translated by Salvatore Scieurba. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994, xlvii + 194 pp., paperback.**

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One of the most important Carmelite figures of the seventeenth century was Nicolas Herman, best known by his religious name Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614-1691). This French Discalced Carmelite became famous for his mystical spirituality as reflected in his posthumous book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. This book is a collection of Brother Lawrence's writings (his *Letters* [chapter 3], *Spiritual Maxims* [chapter 2]) and *Conversations* (chapter 4) recorded by his first biographer-editor Joseph de Beaufort. The book, which underwent several editions and appeared with different titles, was originally published in French shortly after Lawrence's death. The English critical edition of this work, which is the subject of this review, includes a short but helpful introduction to Lawrence's life and writings. The critical edition also includes *the Practice of the Presence of God* (chapter 5) derived from Lawrence's letters by his biographer, and two other biographical pieces: *Eulogy* (chapter 1) and *the Ways of Brother Lawrence* (chapter 6).

Central to Brother Lawrence's teaching is the doctrine of perfectionism. Right from the start of his *Spiritual Maxims*, he says, "All the baptized who are true believers have taken the first step along the way of perfection and will become perfect as long as they persevere in the practice of the following maxims" (35). Lawrence is not clear though in his writings as to what he means by the word "perfection." Perhaps he means "full maturity," as indicated in the Introductory Note to his *Letters*. In these *Letters* Lawrence shows himself as a "man who has now attained full maturity. The spiritual and human coincide perfectly" (47).

Regardless of the obscurity of his presentation of the term perfection, the Carmelite brother believes that by keeping his maxims one can begin to achieve perfection. And at the heart of his maxims is the practice of the presence of God, which he understands as “an application of our mind to God, or a remembrance of God present, that can be brought about either by the imagination or the understanding” (39). Laurence notes that this practice is “the essence of the spiritual life, and...that by practicing it properly you become spiritual in no time” (57). Then, near the end of his *Spiritual Maxims* the Carmelite writer lists some means to acquire the presence of God. One of these means is “great purity of life” (49). It appears that in Laurence’s mind a person becomes perfect when he practices the presence of God.

There are many good lessons in Laurence’s writings. For example, most of his advice for the sufferers and his strong stress on the practice of the presence of God are commendable, although he is not really clear as to what he means by this practice. However, a careful look at his teachings will reveal that they are but moralistic and ethical, teachings that are good, but devoid of the gospel of Christ, teachings that only address man’s problem on a superficial level. Such directions in a sense are not different to the moral and ethical instructions of Confucius. In contrast, the Apostle Paul’s counsels on Christian living are always gospel-centered. For instance, writing to the Philippian Church, Paul exhorts, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). In other words, Paul wants the Philippian believers to conduct themselves according to the gospel, for it is the gospel alone that can bring a genuine transformation.

One further critique is that, throughout his writings, Laurence does not even cite the Scriptures to support his admonitions. Worst of all, he believes in purgatory: “and if God permitted it, purgatory, where I believe I could suffer in atonement for my sins, would be a consolation to me” (61). I wonder then why some Protestants such as John Wesley (1703-1791) would like the works of this Carmelite brother. I cannot in good conscience recommend Laurence’s writings.