

Extra resources



Brother Lawrence - Lyfe story

Born: 1614 in Herimenil, Lorraine in modern-day France

Died: February 12 1691 (aged 77)

'The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.' With these words, Thomas Hobbes, a contemporary of Brother Lawrence, famously described the average life in 17th century Europe. Nicholas Herman had every reason to relate to Hobbes' description. He grew up in a poor family with no option but to join the army. He fought in the Thirty Years War, one of the most brutal wars in Europe's history.

During this war he sustained a near-fatal injury to his sciatic nerve that left him crippled and in constant pain for the rest of his days, most of which were spent washing pots and pans in a kitchen. Despite every apparent reason to the contrary, Nicholas Herman, or Brother Lawrence as he is commonly known, has become a spiritual mentor to many regarding the peace, contentment and joy that are found in a life spent in the presence of God.

When Lawrence was a soldier, he had a spiritual experience that epitomizes much of what he has taught the church over the last 300 years. He came across a barren tree in midst of winter. Upon seeing the tree in its nakedness, he realized that it was waiting in hope of the coming abundance of spring and summer. Through this, he had a deep awareness of the grace of God in its unfailing providence that always brings spring and summer from winter. At that instant, that tree 'first flashed in upon my soul the fact of God.' This was a paradigmatic experience for Brother Lawrence. In the ordinary, everyday mundane reality of a barren tree, Lawrence participated in the presence of God.

After this revelation, Brother Lawrence entered the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris where he was assigned to work in the kitchen. Aside from some time repairing shoes, the kitchen was to be where he would spend most of his life. Lawrence embraced his surroundings as the context through which he could obey and worship God. He said, 'The most excellent method of going to God is that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing people but purely for the love of God.'

Washing dishes was not a distraction from Lawrence's spirituality but rather central to it: 'We ought not to grow tired of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work but the love with which it is performed.' Brother Lawrence offers a fascinating example of the Everyday lyfe zone, with a life that sought to saturate the natural with supernatural, the ordinary with the divine.

Brother Lawrence was mostly unknown throughout his life. We are given an insight into his unique spirituality through a collection of letters and conversations in *Practicing the Presence of God*, compiled by Father Joseph de Beaufort after Brother Lawrence had died. This book has become one of the most popular devotional books, influencing thousands including John Wesley and A W Tozer.

Further resources

Brother Lawrence, *Practising the Presence of God* available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lawrence/practice.htm>