

First Threshings

First Mennonite Church

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There is a Green Hill Far Away

*There is a green hill far
away,
Outside a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was
crucified
Who died to save us all.*

*We may not know, we
cannot tell,
What pains He had to
bear;
But we believe it was for
us
He hung and suffered
there.*

*He died that we might be
forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last
to heaven,
Saved by His precious
blood.*

*There was no other good
enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the
gate
Of heaven and let us in.*

*O dearly, dearly has He
loved,
And we must love Him,
too.
And trust in His
redeeming blood,
And try His works to do.*

Comfort and Joy

Relief. Development. Peace. These are the three areas of Mennonite Central Committee's work, and most of us have had plenty of involvement with the relief part of MCC's outreach. But for me, creating a small comforter this spring was a step toward wholeness. Many comforters were distributed in Chad, Africa, in the early '80's when violence and famine had set the Chadian population on the edge of life. The European Mennonites had a history of work in Chad, so MCC had ready contacts that allowed the flow of comforters from our part of the world to their need.

The need continued when Jim and I were sent to Chad in 1984, but MCC's focus had shifted. Larger agencies were providing relief grain, and the French soldiers had enforced a delicate lull in the violence. Our work was to be development: secure at least one textbook per classroom, teach carpentry, dig wells in cooperation with village leadership, share MCC sewing kits in classes led by Chadian women. There was to be a partnership. There was to be a movement away from handing comforters out, though each one had been deeply needed. *Mutual* leadership was to be the way. The local people weren't very happy with Jim or me, or our MCC colleagues in the area, Todd and Elizabeth. MCC meant comforters. "Where are more blankets?" "We are tired and weary (bien fatigue)." "We don't want to dig our own wells." It felt to us as though the comforters that MCC had distributed made more difficult the work we were sent and assigned to do.

But this spring, I felt the nudge to make a comforter, with my own hands. Picking the fabric (they like darker colors of sturdy fabric), tying those knots, felt like a yes to me: yes to being an agent on God's behalf. Our days, months and years in Chad taught us about the downsides of relief aid, but also taught us that all that we do is but a part of something larger. This spring, rather than worry about whether my action is the "right" action, I am ready to say yes to all three priorities, including the one that had felt like a roadblock. MCC itself is only one part of God's solution to the world's struggles, even with its three widely different priorities. Our

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Mennonite Mission agencies carry on work that is specifically related to the spirit, commitment to Jesus, and the walk of discipleship, work that MCC respectfully holds back from.

Comforters are not *the* answer. They are *one* facet of each us learning to say yes, yes, yes. Yes, God you are working. Yes, you call us to be a part of your work. Yes, you will lead each of us to strengthen relief, development, peace. You will lead us to strengthen belief and trust in you. We and our work are not *the* solution – the redemption of the world is far too large for that to be true. But we are to step into the stream with our material, with our knots, with our readiness, our extended hands, as part of the flow of God that must be followed, not withheld.

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the work of our hands, all be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our hope. Amen.

Pastor Susan

Aleen Ratzlaff (Worship), Hank Unruh (Youth), Jan Amstutz (Nurture), Douglas Graber (Mission).

Absent: Tim Frye (Discernment: on sabbatical for spring semester), Laura Paulus (Care).

Prayer/Meditation: Aleen

Minutes of January 14 and Annual Meeting were accepted as distributed.

Committee Reports. Worship: Met February 9; their adaptation of the resource *Living Ink* for the Lent-Easter worship services is creative and varied in the use of elements and music styles: Erin Unruh and Judy Harder will continue to lead the children's story and children's songs respectively, Deryll Amstutz will tell stories from Luke's gospel and the Old Testament, and the Easter Ensemble will sing at three services led by Holly Swartzendruber. Easter commemorations are: a Maundy Thursday service, reflection centers on Good Friday in the Fellowship Hall (open on a more limited-time basis than last year) and, on Easter Sunday, a sunrise service at Kleibers', brunch in the Fellowship Hall, and the worship service at 10:00 a.m. For two weeks, advertisements giving general information of our church's Easter events will run in the *Free Press*. They are starting to plan worship services for the time Susan will be on sabbatical. **Nurture:** No report. **Mission:** Douglas Graber was welcomed and is enthusiastic about being involved in this committee but they have not yet met: no report. **Care:** they met in early January to receive Jeff and Tammy Wintermote; they have received Ethan and Laurel Koerner who are planning to join our membership and, on the same Sunday, to dedicate their baby. **Hospitality:** About 25 people attended the game night held January 29; they will meet Sunday (February 21) to plan events for the rest of the year; there will be a partially catered carry-in meal Sunday, March 6, for an MCC fundraiser.

Stewardship: Joel and Terry Hagen (Hillsboro Ford) agreed that, because the fence between the two properties have been damaged, it will be removed; Joel and Glen Diener will meet with Robert Wall (Everence) March 3 to seek advice regarding a more beneficial investment than the current one; the sound system in the sanctuary will probably be worked on in-house.

Council Reports. Discernment: Douglas Graber was affirmed to lead the Mission Committee; some of the congregation's suggestions from the January 13 meeting will be discussed at their next meeting for possible inclusion. **Vision:** Primary focus has been to fill the interim, half-time pastor position, working with Heidi Regier Kreider (WDC Minister): they will be interviewing a possible candidate in a couple of weeks so an announcement in regard to the candidate is expected soon; Kelly Linnens is working on the Memorandum of Understanding. Marlin Bartel was welcomed to the Council. It is hoped a younger church member will join Vision. **Coordinating Cabinet:** Met today: discussed (1) Susan's sabbatical; (2) Western

District Conference's Assembly this summer and the need for our church to select up to ten delegates. This issue will be revisited at Ministries Council's April 21 meeting. (3) Annual review by the pastor of the youth pastor has been completed by Susan and Hank for this year although Susan has yet to receive feedback from the youth and their parents.

Treasurer: No report. **Youth Pastor:** Youth Sunday and the HiFY sponsored Super Bowl party (February 7) were exciting; three most important upcoming events are: (1) to finish painting the Youth Room (maybe with help from the congregation); figure out monthly fund-raising events starting in March (ideas are solicited); July 4 weekend mission trip at the St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship. Victoria Wintermote and Sarah Diener will attend the Anabaptist Vision & Discipleship Series at Hesston College February 19. (Other HiFY members hope to hear Shane Claiborne later in the spring/early summer.) **Pastor:** Starting in fall, Eydie Graber would prefer to be part of a rotation of five or so persons/groups to provide the Wednesday evening meals; Susan plans to meet once or twice more with Cheryl Bartel regarding the 50th anniversary of our current church building; she is glad Douglas is heading up our mission activities; she is looking for ways to recognize more of the church subcommittee work at future annual meetings, e.g. those who deliver our bulletin to shut-ins every Friday, and those who run errands for people and/or take them to their doctors' appointments. The MCC dinner will be discussed this Sunday (February 21); she is pleased to see a few more photos on the bulletin board, and she thanked Callie Linnens for assisting with this project.

Old Business: Doug hopes to have copies of the revised Policy Manual pages to MC members before the April 21 meeting.

Next meeting date/time: Thursday, April 21, 7:00 p.m.
(The official version of the minutes is available in the church office.)

March events

- 2 **8:00 p.m. Care Committee meeting**
- 2-5 Tabor College play *Proof* by David Auburn.
- 3 **7:00 p.m. Stewardship Committee meeting**
- 4 T.C. 9:45 a.m. Lifelong Learning *Fall Risk and Osteoporosis** (Alisa Schmidt is a co-speaker.)
- 6 **MCC/FMC carry-in following worship**
- 7-9 MCC Comforter Blitz, Journey M.C., Yoder
- 11 Bethel College 7:30 p.m. opera *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Christoph Gluck
- 12-20 T.C. Spring Break
- 13 B.C. 3:00 p.m. *Iphigenia in Tauris*
- 16 **No meal or activities**
- 19-28 B.C. Spring Break

20 **Palm Sunday**
 22 **7:00 p.m. Worship Committee meeting**
 24 **Maundy Thursday** 7:00 p.m. service
 25 **Good Friday** Stations of the Cross
 27 **Easter Sunday:**
6:30 a.m. Sunrise Service at Kleibers'
9:00 a.m. Brunch/egg hunt
10:00 a.m. Worship service

April 1 T.C.: Lifelong Learning *World War II German Prisoner of War Camp in Peabody, Kansas.*
 (Peggy Goertzen, speaker)

Scrabble Fun with Myrta Bartel et al

As good friends of Myrta's, Elaine Jantzen and Sylvia Abrahams are among those who will miss her most. Elaine said, "We started playing *Scrabble* when Delilah Deckert was still living so the foursome was Myrta, Delilah, Sylvia and me; that was over fifteen years ago. Then, when Delilah died, Martha Krause stepped in; that has been a lot of years ago." She remembers Myrta as always being pleasant, and having a good sense of humor. "She and I would often look at each other and say, 'That's a word??' Of course, we all had our *Scrabble* dictionaries.

"We played just for fun – not for winning any prizes or getting proud about it; but we did learn a lot too."

Elaine Jantzen

(Unfortunately, Sylvia hasn't yet returned from her trip to see her brother in California, to add any comments here.)

"In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

With those words of Jesus, MCC has launched another plea for comforters. And, on their website, they've added: "*We honor Christ when we give our best. Think about making a comforter that offers dignity to the receiver – one that you would be happy to receive.*"

As with all their projects, MCC has, understandably, many stipulations on how the comforters are to be made, some of which are that *the fabric must be heavier, new or nearly new, wear well, be washable...and have cheerful, bright color combinations.* They also have size requirements (*60"x80" is most requested*) – stitching instructions (*smooth and uniform using strong thread*), ample seam allowances – finishing-off instructions (*thread ends are to be clipped and all loose threads removed*) – and, finally: *knotted comforters are to be tied with crochet cotton, spacing the knots 4"–8" apart.*

MCC ends with a request to the quilters:
"Please pray for the family who will be using your comforter – that God will provide 'comfort' and keep them in His care. Thank you for your help."

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"I *hate* to be cold, and would love to help others stay warm in the cold winters to come!!"

Who but a far-sighted, kind soul would be thinking about comforters in the heat of summer? Someone like Jan Amstutz, it turns out. So, last June, Jan wrote an e-mail to various women in church, encouraging them, and any interested others, to join her in making comforter tops for MCC to be sent out to people in distress. "I plan," she continued, "to be at FMC most Wednesday evenings this summer. Join me if you can at 7 p.m. Bring scissors, rotary cutters, a portable sewing machine if you have one, and your good ideas."

Jan had bought a stack of squares from the Quilters' Corner at the MCC Relief sale in April; they were already cut to size and just needed to be pieced, and she said she had "lots of fabric when we run out of the cut squares so feel free to invite anyone I may have missed in this list." And, through announcements in our church bulletin, she made sure to include those quilters who don't have e-mail: "Come once, come twice, every time, or whenever you can! *Anyone* is welcome." She almost sounded like an ice cream vendor plying refreshments out on our baking streets.

Many of us were shedding clothes, chugging iced drinks and heading for any scrap of shade we could find but enough ladies, with sewing skills and listening hearts, bestirred themselves from their heat-induced languor and picked up scraps of fabric instead. And so it all began. The enthusiasm was contagious and, after the school year began, they moved to working on Monday evenings.

The willing workers (old-timers: does that name ring a bell??) were Sylvia Abrahams, Ruth Ann Penner, Velda Hiebert, Nancy Graber, Pam Bartel, Susan Schultz, Deanne Duerksen, Robin Ottoson and Elfrieda Funk. As they measured and snipped and sewed and chatted, their embrace of the project led to ever more ideas. And, during Advent, Judy Harder suggested involving the children, hoping it would be fun for them to experience part of the process of how comforters are put together. So, on Wednesday, December 16 in between supper and rehearsing for the nativity play, they were invited to lay out squares on long tables in the Fellowship Hall. There were enough for two comforters "which," Jan explained, "will be for MCC

(not the MCC sale), so the pattern is not terribly important.” Sharon Diener said that 7th graders Carson Linnens and Caleb Diener tried their best to lay out some sort of a pattern until a couple of boys messed up their plan. The young kids did, indeed, have fun arranging and rearranging each other’s squares but it wasn’t apparent that much thought went into design or color!

One member of the group remembered that their first tops were sort of random combinations of planning and improvisation “which was a lot of fun,” she said, “except when we needed just a little special something. Then Sylvia, Ruth Ann and Pam, and other artistically-minded people started helping us think through some patterns: they came up with cool designs and patterns that they worked on at home. Sylvia really worked out a lot of the measurements – essential when trying to use the scraps of fabric in the best possible way.”

“At some point,” someone said, “we stopped or slowed down because we were working on the quilt (hand-embroidered and hand-quilted) for the MCC quilt auction. Velda did the original embroidery and Jan and Nancy worked on the fabric to join the embroidered panels.”

Back at the other project, fabric started coming in from all over: there was the self-titled “fabric scrounger” who haunted the Newton Etcetera Shop, coming home with box after box of fabric – and several of the women made trips to the MCC workroom where, with great help from Irma, they obtained some nice pieces, including dinosaur panels and prints, some new sheets (solids, plaids, stripes) and other large pieces, all good for backings, also smaller pieces that could inspire designs. Jan had a good supply donated by her mother-in-law (a primo quilter, apparently); this included a couple of star patterns that had already been assembled and which several in the group used as centerpieces for two comforters. Robin’s niece from Louisiana became very enthusiastic about the project – and the idea that the comforters would go to refugees – so she sent a big box of fabric which included some large yardages of children’s fabric, including a long cotton curtain. Some artistic soul (maybe Pam but modesty prevented her from acknowledging it) figured out a way to use the long weird shape to make a nifty set of panels/strips.” Pam became known for her gentle way of making suggestions as she looked at apparently disparate pieces of fabric that people were puzzling over. One of the workers said, “I think she’s made lots of stuff for her family. She has a good sense of color and thinks through alternative patterns. Sylvia and Ruth Ann are very imaginative, too.”

Susan pieced five tops at home using material she had accumulated and, finding out that JoAnn’s Fabrics in Wichita was moving, she “regaled them,” as one woman described it, “with some mega-bargains from there. We were all delighted and energized to see the rich colors she had been able to snag as backing for her comforters.”

Jan made the soccer boy top from fabric she had left over from a quilt she was making for a grandson, every other square having a picture of a kid playing soccer. She said, “I did it on the one day they closed the clinic where I work due to ice. It was a fun day off!” And the group agreed the top really turned out well.

Deanne was also modest about her contributions to the project, but her support was very much appreciated. And Elfrieda said, “I was able to help a few times but comforters and quilts are not my ‘thing’. I was scared to sew squares and then rows together for fear they wouldn’t fit! I’ve had no experience in this. But, everyone was very gracious to a learner. I enjoyed the time together – and the sewing when I finally got my machine threaded right!” It was generally agreed that Jan’s a really hard worker. “When she wasn’t there,” one woman acknowledged, “not much got done!” And, according to Jan, Nancy was invaluable at organizing the work.

So, with amicable cooperation interlaced with a profusion of abilities, a total of about three dozen quilts were made by our congregation. This included a smaller one that Pastor Susan had put together at home recently and which she took to the HiFY Superbowl party where Tammy Wintermote, Nancy, Elfrieda and Jan helped her knot it. She said, “I liked the idea of tying something together as a way to be together, and do something while we were also enjoying the game. It didn’t take long, with five of us working!”

Final notes of appreciation are for Marie Kessler and her assistant Neva at Kessler Kreations who were very generous with letting the “scrounger” sit in the store and learn how to cut fabric, and for Kelly Linnens who photographed all the comforters: each one was lain on a table with its backing placed diagonally across one corner; it was quite amazing to see the wide range of beautiful – and fun – designs and patterns. Kelly will put the photos on a flash drive so they can be projected for the congregation to see during an upcoming worship service.

A good time was had by all FMC’s willing workers: they appreciated being given permission to work in the Fellowship Hall, they enjoyed the project’s challenges, they were energized by each

other's company and ideas, and they were pleased with the end results.

A postscript from Jan who, when asked if she has any quilting plans, said, "I think we may take a break after the Comforter Blitz. We may find some great fabric inspirations at the MCC Sale to start on some new projects. There are also still some partial comforter ideas at church – lots of small pieces and maybe enough fabric for two or three to be finished. So, lots to do next year. And she added, "I have been amazed at the creativity in our church. So fun to see what we can do when we put our heads and hands together!"

The person who contributed most to this article didn't want to be identified – but, nearly everyone else added comments so, many thanks to you all – and congratulations for a job well done!

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Last year, 45,443 comforters were shipped to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti, Ethiopia, Ukraine, North Korea, Serbia, Iraq, Canada, the U.S., and more.

The Practice of the Presence of God

This book describes the Christian walk of Lawrence of the Resurrection commonly referred to as Brother Lawrence; it has had such a powerful influence on its readers that it has been in print since 1692, the year after Brother Lawrence died. The first section of the book is the eulogy delivered by Abbé of Beaufort at Brother Lawrence's funeral. This is followed by people's recollections of conversations they had with Brother Lawrence, letters written by him to 'several religious and devout persons', and finally his spiritual maxims and his way of life.

Brother Lawrence was born in France and served briefly in the military, then as a servant in the home of a wealthy banker. Several years later, he felt called to live a hermit's life, but soon realized that was not for him so, in 1649, he joined an austere branch of the Order of the Discalced (Barefooted) Carmelites, an ancient monastic community that originated in the Holy Land. They followed the teaching of St. John of the Cross spending three hours in prayer and meditation every day and, to express reverence, humility, poverty and penance, wore only sandals or went completely barefooted, practicing the absolute negation of everything that doesn't come from God. (St. John was a 16th century monk whose poetry is still considered the 'pinnacle of mystical Spanish literature'.)

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One winter's day Brother Lawrence saw a bare tree and considered that, sometime afterward, leaves then flowers then fruit would appear. This gave him a lofty awareness of the providence and power of God that never left him. He lifted himself up to God by contemplating the Creation, persuaded that books teach few things in comparison with that great book of the world when we know how to study it as we should. He remarked how each of the world's different traits displays the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the Creator.

In his early days in the monastery, and guided by its tenets, Brother Lawrence often spent his entire prayer time rejecting stray thoughts. He confessed he had never been able to pray by a rule like the others so he decided to develop the habit of continual conversation with God: wherever he found himself and whatever he was doing, he focused his heart and his mind on God, thanking Him, praising Him, and asking for His grace to do whatever had to be done. And, if he allowed himself to forget God, he confessed that to Him, gently but determinedly drawing his thoughts back to God.

He was assigned to work in the monastery kitchen, work he didn't prefer, but, since he wanted to do everything for the love of God, he went prayerfully to his tasks and, for some fifteen years, found "great ease" and "delight" in doing this work and other menial assignments. He never complained, even when (to test him) his overseer treated him with harshness and severity.

"The most excellent method of going to God is to do our common business without any view of pleasing people, and (as far as we are able) purely for the love of God," he said.

For four years he lived in a state of terrible torment brought on in part by divine Providence which, he was sure, permitted it in order to purify him, and in part through his lack of experience and his wish to walk his own path in the spiritual life. As he contemplated his past sins, he was so horrified that he judged himself unworthy of the slightest consolations of God but he did what he could to continually please Him, trusting in Him fully. He only attained peace of mind when he decided that, damned or not, he would continue until death trying to do everything for love for God and he ceased to wonder about heaven or hell; this gave him the spiritual freedom to rejoice in all things.

"After having given myself to God to make amends for my sins, I renounced for His love everything that was not Himself. I sometimes considered myself before Him as a poor criminal at the feet of his Judge, and at other times I regarded Him in my heart as my Father, as my God. I worshiped Him there as often as I was able, keeping my mind in his Holy presence, and recalling it whenever I found it had become distracted from Him. I had no trouble with this practice, which I continued in

spite of all the difficulties I found in practicing it, not becoming troubled or worried when I was involuntarily distracted. I maintained this practice no less during the day than during my times set aside for prayer. For at every moment, even in the busiest part of my work, I banished and dismissed from my mind everything that could take away the thought of God from me.”

He remained patient, sweet-tempered, moderate, firm and tranquil in all these trials. Since he had such a low image of himself, he asked only for the cup of the Lord, which he was given to drink in all its bitterness. He firmly resolved to endure his sufferings for all eternity if that was God’s will. That was exactly the frame of mind God wanted him to have so He could flood him with His grace. From that moment on, the firmness of his heart increased more than ever and the grace he received more than compensated for all his past afflictions. He wrote, “The world seems very small to a soul who contemplates the grandeur of God”.

Keeping himself in such awareness of God became so natural that, as he described in his letters, he spent the last forty years of his life in the moment-by-moment practice of the presence of God – that is, in silent and intimate conversations with Him.

Through long hours of prayer, he started by convincing himself of God’s reality by the light of faith; this filled him with the grandeur of this infinite Being. Before starting his work every day, he prayed, ‘My God, since You are with me, and since it is Your will that I should apply my mind to these outward things, I pray that You will give me the grace to keep company with You. But, so that my work may be better, Lord, work with me; receive my work and possess all my affections.’ “Finally, during my work, I continued to speak to Him in a familiar way, offering him my little services, and asking for His grace. At the end of my work, I examined how I had done it and, if I found any good in it, I thanked God. If I noticed errors, I asked His forgiveness for them and, without becoming discouraged, I resolved to change and begin anew to remain with God as if I had never strayed. So, by picking myself up after my falls, and by doing many little acts of faith and love, I came to a state in which it would be as difficult for me *not* to think of God as it had been difficult to accustom myself to thinking of Him at the beginning.”

Brother Lawrence called the practice of the presence of God “...the shortest and easiest road to Christian perfection, the very form and life of virtue, and the great protection against sin.”

He assured his friends that to make this practice easier and to form the habit of it in ourselves, we only need courage and willingness. For it was seen that, in the midst of the heavy work of cooking for the monks, even during the most attention-diverting duties, his mind and spirit were fixed on God. He did the work that two

brothers usually did. With exactness and moderation, he gave each thing the time it required, always maintaining his modest and tranquil manner. He worked neither slowly nor hastily, remaining in constant evenness of mind and in unchanging peace. His passions became so tranquil that he scarcely ever felt them. He was like a high mountain that sees storms formed only at its feet.

Faith gave him his great veneration of the sacred mysteries – especially for the most Holy Sacrament of communion – and a profound respect for the Word of God, for the Church and its holy ordinances. From this living faith were born his firm hope in the goodness of God, his sonlike trust in God’s Providence, and his complete abandonment into God’s hands, without causing him any worry about what would happen to him after death. He was not content, during the greatest part of his life, simply to rest his salvation passively on the power of God’s grace and the merits of Jesus Christ.

“The greatest glory we could give God,” he asserted, “is to totally mistrust our own strength and place our trust completely in His protection. This is how to sincerely acknowledge our own weakness and recognize the omnipotence of the Creator.”

God’s grace often overwhelmed him. He would tell Him, “It is too much for me. Please give these sorts of favors and consolations to the sinners and people who do not know You at all, in order to attract them to Your service. I beg You to let me return to You what You have given me, for You well know that it is not Your gifts that I look for and desire but it is Yourself, and I can be content with nothing less!”

Whenever he did a virtuous act, he would say to Him, “My God, I would not know how to do that if You did not enable me to do it.” Immediately he was given strength, and beyond. Conversely, when he failed he admitted his fault and said to God, “It is up to You to prevent me from falling and to correct what is not good.” He troubled himself no further about his fault.

All we must do is recognize God’s intimate presence within us and speak to Him every moment, asking Him for His help. In this way we will know His will in doubtful things and we will do those things well that He is clearly asking of us, offering them to Him before doing them and giving Him thanks for having done them once we have finished.

“In this continual conversation,” he asserted, “one is also busy praising worshiping and unceasingly loving God for His infinite goodness and perfection.

“We should confidently ask Him for His grace. In doubtful matters, God never fails to give light when we have no other purpose than to please Him and do all for His love. A soul is all the more dependent on grace the more it aspires to go on to perfection.

“We must not grow weary of doing little things for the love of God, who looks not on the great size of the work, but on the love in it. We must not be surprised at

failing frequently in the beginning; in the end, we will have developed the habit that enables us to produce these acts of love without thinking about them, deriving a great deal of pleasure from them.

“All things are possible to one who believes; even more to one who hopes; still more to one who loves; and even more to one who perseveres in the practice of these three virtues.

“One must be acquainted with a person before loving him. To be acquainted with God, one must think often about Him; and when we do love Him, we will also think very often about Him, for our heart is where our treasure is. So let us think constantly about Him: worship Him without ceasing. Live and die with Him. This is the beautiful call in the life of a Christian. In a word, it is our joy.

“To become truly spiritual the heart must be empty of all other things, since God desires to be its only Master. He is prevented from doing all that He desires if it is not empty. You would think it uncivil to leave a friend by himself who was visiting you. Why abandon God and leave Him by Himself? So do not forget Him!

“It is essential to put our entire trust in God and rid ourselves of all other cares. Do not be discouraged by the reluctance your nature feels about doing this; you have to force yourself. At first we often think we are wasting our time, but we must continue in our resolve to persevere in this way as long as we live, in spite of all the difficulties. He does not require a great deal of us; all He asks is a little remembrance of Him from time to time, a little worship. Sometimes we should ask for His grace, and sometimes we should offer Him our sufferings. At other times we ought to thank Him for the grace He has given us and that He is working in us.

“In the midst of your work, console yourself with Him as often as you can. During your meals and your conversations, lift your heart toward Him from time to time; the slightest little remembrance will always be very pleasant to Him. We can make our heart a prayer room into which we can retire from time to time to converse with Him.”

And, to a friend who was in agony, he wrote, “I do not ask God for you to be delivered from your sufferings, but I am earnestly asking Him to give you strength and patience to endure them as long as it is His will for you to suffer. Console yourself with the One who keeps you fastened to the cross. He will free you from it when He judges it fitting. They are blessed who suffer with Him.

“The world does not understand these truths. It is just that they suffer as people of the world and not as Christians. They regard sicknesses as sufferings of the flesh and not as God’s graces, and because of that they find nothing in them but what is contrary and arduous to nature. But those who consider their sufferings as coming from the hand of God, as effects of His mercy,

and as means that He uses for their salvation, commonly enjoy in them such great sweetness and consolations that they can actually feel them.

“God is often nearer to us in our times of sickness and infirmity than when we enjoy perfect health. He wants to heal you Himself. I cannot understand how a soul who is with God and who wants only Him is capable of suffering. Worship Him in your infirmities and present them to Him from time to time as an offering of sacrifice. In the worst of your pains, ask Him humbly and lovingly, as a child would ask his loving father, for conformity to His holy will and for the help of His grace.

“To be sure, these prayers are a little hard for our human nature, but they are very pleasing to God and sweet to those who love Him. Love softens the sufferings, and when we love God, we ought to suffer for Him with joy and courage. He is the Father of the afflicted and is always ready to help us”.

According to Abbé of Beaufort, God sent Brother Lawrence three great illnesses in the final years of his life to prepare him for death and render him worthy of the reward He had prepared for him. In each one, Brother Lawrence wanted only what God’s divine Providence should ordain. He had been longing for the blessed moment of death, so he conceived much satisfaction from its approach. He faced it bravely, his only remaining desire being to suffer for the love of God. On his deathbed he purposely turned on his right side knowing that this position would be extremely painful because of his pleurisy. But his spirit was content. After he had received the last Sacraments, a Brother asked him what he was doing, and what was going through his mind. He said, “I am doing what I will do through all eternity. I am blessing God, I am praising God, and I am adoring and loving Him with all my heart.” He no longer *believed* in the presence of God in his soul but, by the light of faith, he could already *see* something of God’s intimate Presence. His cheerful countenance so covered his pain that some of his brothers wondered if he was suffering at all. A few days later, he gave up his soul to God with the peace and tranquility of a person who falls asleep.

Spiritual Maxims of Brother Lawrence

All baptized believers have taken the first step on the road that leads to perfection, and will be perfect providing they persevere in the practice of the following guides:

Always keep our eyes on God and His glory in all we do and say: we must strive toward the goal of becoming perfect worshippers of God.

We must consider in depth who we are, and we will find ourselves worthy of all scorn, unworthy of the name

of Christian. We will find ourselves among those whom God chooses to make humble through an abundance of sufferings and travails.

We must resolve firmly to overcome, by the grace of God, all the difficulties found in the spiritual life.

We must believe beyond any doubt that it is to our advantage to sacrifice ourselves to God and that He is pleased by our sacrifice. It is normal in His divine Providence that we should be abandoned to all sorts of conditions, sufferings, and temptations, as much and for as long as it is His will. Without this submission of heart and spirit to the will of God, there can be no devotion or going on to perfection.

Practices Necessary to Acquire the Spiritual Life

The holiest, most universal and most necessary practice is the presence of God: it is to take pleasure in and become accustomed to His Divine company, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly in our hearts with Him at all times, especially in times of temptation, pain, spiritual dryness, revulsion to spiritual things, and even unfaithfulness and sin.

We must apply ourselves continually so that all our actions may be little spontaneous conversations with God, coming from purity and simplicity of heart.

We must weigh all our actions without the impetuosity or impulsiveness that make a distraught spirit; work gently, tranquilly, and lovingly with God, asking Him to accept our labor.

Know that God is constantly present so, whatever we're doing (even during our devotions) we should stop briefly and frequently to adore Him deep within our hearts and take pleasure in Him – praise Him, beseech Him, offer Him our heart, and thank Him. This is very pleasing to God, and it destroys self-love.

Our greatest witness to God of our faithfulness is to continually renounce and turn from created things to take pleasure in our Creator.

It is impossible to withdraw inwardly forever, but prudence will guide us.

All our adoration must be done in faith, believing that in truth God is in our hearts. We must worship, love, and serve Him in spirit and truth: He sees all that is happening or will happen in us and in all creatures. We must believe that He is altogether independent of everything and that He is the One on whom all creation depends. He is infinitely perfect and is worthy, by His infinite excellence and His sovereignty, of all that we are and of all that is in heaven and on earth. We must believe that He can dispose according to His good pleasure in time and in eternity, and that we justly owe Him all our thoughts, our words, and our actions.

We must study carefully which virtues we need most, the sins into which we often fall and the most frequent and inevitable occasions of our falls. We must humbly present to Him our miseries and afflictions, and

ask Him lovingly for the help of His grace. By doing this, in God we will discover all virtues without having any ourselves.

How to Worship God in Spirit and Truth

God is Spirit so we must worship Him with a humble and true spiritual adoration in the depth and center of our souls that God alone can see. This will become a part of our very natures – as if God were one with our souls, and our souls one with Him.

We are to recognize as a very present reality in our spirit that God is infinitely perfect, infinitely worthy of worship, and infinitely distanced from evil. He is infinitely greater than all the divine attributes ascribed to Him by people. What person, lacking in wisdom though he may be, could refuse to employ all his strength to respect and worship this great and infinitely worthy God?

We are to admit that we are entirely contrary to Him, but that He is willing to make us like Himself if we desire it. Who could be so imprudent as to turn away, even for a moment, from the reverence, love, service, and continual adoration that we most justly owe Him?

The Union of the Soul with God

The three kinds of spiritual union are habitual, virtual, and actual: Habitual union is when we are united to God solely by grace. Virtual union is when we have begun to unite ourselves to God and remain united with Him as long as we continue our efforts. Actual union is the most perfect of the three: being wholly spiritual, its action can be felt within the soul because the soul is not asleep, as it is in the case of the other two unions. It is not a simple expression of the heart, as in saying like, “My God, I love You with all my heart”. This union is indefinable, found in a gentle, peaceable, spiritual, reverent, humble, loving and utterly simple soul. This ‘indefinable something’ raises the soul and presses it to love God, to worship Him, and even to caress Him with an inexpressible tenderness known only to those who experience it. All who aspire to union with God should know that everything that can delight the will serves to further this union.

It is impossible for our human minds to understand God. In order to unite ourselves to Him we must deprive our wills of every kind of spiritual and bodily pleasure so that, being thus freed, we can love God *in our wills* above all things. For, if the will can somehow understand God, it can only be through love. There is a great difference between the feelings and the operation of the will, since the *feelings* of the will come to an end in the soul, whereas the *operation* of the will, which is the expression of true love, ends at God.

On Practicing the Presence of God

This is the application of our spirit to God; it is the vivid recollection that God is present with us. It can be accomplished either through the imagination or by the understanding – achieved by choosing to frequently recall your spirit into the presence of God. As soon as Brother Lawrence’s mind was freed from its outward duties, and frequently when he was busiest, the uppermost part of his spirit or the highest part of his soul lifted itself without any diligence on his part, and remained as if it were suspended and firmly held on God, as if it were in its place of rest. By faith he felt as though he was actually present with God. Outward things almost never troubled his soul’s interior peace.

To keep the person focused on Him, God takes care to supply it so well with all that it can desire that, over and over, it finds deep within itself a source of delicious nourishment.

The Means of Acquiring the Presence of God

As we go about our lives, we must continue to gaze upon God from time to time. We must finish all our actions looking to God. Time and labor are necessary to acquire this practice so we must not be discouraged when we fail: the habit is formed only with difficulty, but, when it is formed, we will do everything with pleasure.

As we start this practice we could say a phrase like, “My God, I am entirely Yours”; “God of love, I love You with all my heart”; “Lord, do with me according to Your heart”. Phrases like these help us to keep our minds on God.

When practicing the presence of God is done faithfully, it secretly works marvelous effects in the soul, brings a flood of graces from the Lord, and leads it without its knowledge to gaze simply and lovingly at God and find His presence everywhere. This gaze is the easiest, the most holy, the most solid, and the most effective type of prayer.

To arrive at this state, we have to mortify our senses, since it is impossible for a soul that still has some creature satisfaction to fully enjoy this divine presence. To be with God, one must absolutely leave all created things behind.

The Fruits of Actively Living in the Presence of God

The soul easily obtains grace for us in our temptations and in the inevitable contact we have with created things. The soul that is accustomed to exercising its faith through this practice sees and feels God’s presence by simply remembering God. It invokes Him easily and effectively. The more it advances, the more its faith becomes alive, and finally its faith becomes so penetrating that it could almost say, “I no longer *believe*; I *see* and I *experience*.”

This practice strengthens our hope. Our hope increases as our spiritual knowledge increases, as our

faith lays hold of the very secrets of God. By finding in God a beauty surpassing not only physical bodies on earth, but of the most perfect souls and of angels, our hope is strengthened – reassured by the very greatness of the blessing to which it aspires.

Being always with God who is a consuming fire, this fire of sacred love reduces to ashes all that can be opposed to it. The soul, so kindled, can no longer live except in the presence of its God. This divine presence produces a holy ardor, a sacred zeal, and a passionate desire to see God loved, known, served and worshiped by all creation.

By gazing inward at Him, the soul so familiarizes itself with God that it spends almost all its life in continual acts of love, adoration, contrition, confidence, thanksgiving, offering, beseeching, and all other excellent virtues. All these acts may even sometimes merge to become nothing less than one single continuing act that no longer comes and goes because the soul is always in God’s divine presence.

Few people arrive at this stage; it is a special grace with which God favors a few chosen souls, since in the end this steady, simple gaze is a gift from His generous hand. But, for the consolation of those who wish to embrace this holy practice, He ordinarily gives this gift to souls who prepare themselves for it. If He does not give it, we can at least, with the help of His ordinary grace, acquire, by the practice of the presence of God, a state of prayer that comes very close to this simple, continual vision of God.

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The Abbé of Beaufort ends this book with *Brother Lawrence’s Way of Life*. He says, “The moral excellence of Brother Lawrence did not make him at all unsociable. He had a very warm manner that inspired confidence, making one feel from the outset that one could disclose everything to him, and that one had found a friend.”

Brother Lawrence used faith as the only light to instruct and guide him as he sought to know God. Faith revealed to him the greatness of God and of Jesus Christ. “He alone,” he used to say, “is capable of making Himself known to us as He is. We search in reasoning and in the sciences: God paints His own portrait in the depths of our souls, and yet we do not want to see Him there. We disdain to converse with our King who is always present in us.

“It is not enough,” he continues, “to love God and to know Him only by what books tell us about Him, by fleeting feelings of devotion, or by some sort of personal spiritual illumination. We must make our faith alive and by faith rise above our feelings, to adore God and Jesus Christ in all Their divine perfections.”

In the little reading Brother Lawrence did, he preferred the holy Gospels to all other books because he

found in Jesus Christ's own words a way to nourish his faith more simply and purely.

He talked with God in continual acts of adoration and love, invoking the help of our Lord in what he had to do. He thanked Him after doing it, and asked His forgiveness for his negligences by admitting them. And since these acts of devotion were closely linked with his duties, and since the duties furnished him with the material for his acts of devotion, he did them all the more easily and, far from turning him aside from his work, they helped him do it well.

He confessed that he had difficulty with this way of life at first and that he used to go for considerable lengths of time without remembering the presence of God; but, after humbly admitting his fault, he began it once again without trouble. His perseverance was rewarded with a continual remembrance of God. His varied acts were changed into a simple vision of God, into an illuminated love, into an enjoyment without interruption.

"The time of business" he used to say "is no different from the time of prayer. I possess God as tranquilly in the noise and clatter of my kitchen as if I were on my knees before the Blessed Sacrament." He made his exclusive focus on God become so familiar that it seemed impossible to him to turn aside from it and be concerned with anything else.

"And it is not necessary to have great things to do," he said. "I turn over my little omelet in the frying pan for the love of God. When it is finished, if I have nothing to do, I prostrate myself on the ground and adore my God from whom the grace came to make it. After that, I get back up, more content than a king."

"People search for methods," he continued, "to learn to love God. Is it not much shorter and more direct to do everything for the love of God, to use every one of our duties to show that love to Him, and to maintain His presence in us by the communion of our hearts with Him?"

"It is not enough to offer God our works, to invoke His help, and to produce acts of love," he asserted. From the beginning, Brother Lawrence had entirely forsaken himself. The love of the will of God had replaced the attachment one ordinarily has to one's own will.

"I no longer think about virtue nor about my salvation," he said. "After giving myself entirely to God to make amends for my sins, and renouncing all that is not God out of love for Him, I came to believe that I no longer had anything to do the rest of my life except to live as if there were no one in the world but God and me."

A copy of *The Practice of the Presence of God* is being donated to the church library and will be available to borrow after it has been processed. *PB*

All submissions of interest to the FMC family are welcome and will be included, depending on timeliness and space availability. (Anonymous submissions are accepted but not preferred.) *First Threshings* is distributed the first Sunday of each month so materials should be submitted at least one week previously. Comments pro/con regarding any aspect of the newsletter are also welcome. Please address these to Pat Bartel, compiler/editor: mailslot 107 or meadowlark. bartel@gmail.com.