

# BROTHER LAWRENCE - THE SAINT WHOSE SPIRITUALITY HAS MOST INFLUENCED POPE LEO

In December 2025, on the papal plane on the way home from his first international trip to Turkey and Lebanon, after being asked by a journalist about the conclave and what it's been like becoming the pope, Pope Leo XIV referenced a book that has greatly influenced his spirituality.



*"Besides St. Augustine," Pope Leo said that "The Practice of the Presence of God" by a 17th-century Carmelite friar named Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection is a book that can help anyone to understand my spirituality. It's a very simple book by someone who doesn't even give his last name," the pope told journalists on the papal plane on 2 December, "I read it many years ago, but it describes a type of prayer and spirituality where one simply gives*

*one's life to the Lord and allows the Lord to lead."*

*"And if you want to know something about me, that's been my spirituality for many years, in midst of great challenges — living in Peru, during years of terrorism, being called to service in places where I never thought I would be called to serve to — I trust in God, and that message is something that I share with all people," he continued.*

After being asked what it was like for him during the conclave, Pope Leo mentioned the book and said: *"I resigned myself to the fact, when I saw how things were going, [that] this could be a reality. I took a deep breath. I said, here we go. Lord, you're in charge, and you lead the way."*

## SAINT OF THE WEEK – Brother Lawrence (1614-1691)

*French Catholic Religious Brother – Feast Day: 11 January*



By its fruit we know the tree. We may know little about Nicolas Herman, the young man who would become Brother Lawrence, but his writings and adult life reveal some essential qualities: he was intelligent, cheerful, a seeker of the truth; and his whole life was directed towards Christ. He dug deep into the complexities of reality and uncovered its hidden meaning, something he would describe in a way both simple and profound. 'Lawrence' would be his name in Carmel. But before that, he was Nicolas Herman, born in 1614 in Hériménil, a small French village in the region of Lorraine. The family was most probably poor: Nicolas does not seem to have had an education that developed his gifts and talents. But we do know that he fell in love with God! in a way that was quite unexpected.

**On fire with love** - The young Nicolas used to reflect on the meaning of life. He contemplated life's wonders - being born, breathing, thinking, loving, and the whole teeming world of nature. A voice within his heart told him that all this must have sprung from a hidden source. At eighteen, he discovered the secret. It was winter, and Nicolas

was looking at a tree. In appearance, it was dead. Then he realised that soon the springtime sun would call all of nature to life again: there would be work in the fields, birds singing, trees covered with buds, flowers and fruit. Since childhood, he had watched this process faithfully renewed. But this time more than ever before, he was struck by the rhythm of the year, by this force of life which an invisible hand had inscribed in the heart of the cosmic event.

Nicolas confided to his friend and biographer, Joseph de Beaufort, that he suddenly received 'a profound insight into God's providence'. In an instant, he perceived God as the Living One: Love concealed behind his gifts. Nicolas later declared that this vision had 'never been erased from his soul' and that he felt on fire with great love. From that time on, 'he would use visible things to reach the invisible'. In nature he could see the face of God. The sun and stars, the murmuring of a stream, the song of the blackbird and the flowers in the fields now spoke to him in a new way. God became someone real for him, someone he wanted to thank. Nicolas was no longer the same person. This was his first conversion.

**The young soldier** - The path ahead, though, was not a straight one. Life was extremely precarious in those days. Not long after his conversion, he experienced all around him plague, famine and war. The French troops occupied the Duchy of Lorraine, which at that time was independent, and its exiled duke organised an army to win back his territory. Nicolas Herman decided to join up. During this war, infamous for its inhuman cruelties, the armies pillaged the surrounding area and caused disorder of all kinds. Nicolas would often speak about the 'sins' he had committed. Great or small, they existed; and he would deplore them keenly.

Twice he faced death. On one occasion, he was suspected by the enemy of being a spy and was sentenced to be hanged. He managed to explain himself and was released. The second time, he was in the army camp just outside Rambervillers. The troops opened a breach in the town's ramparts and forced the seven hundred French occupants to surrender. During this attack, Nicolas was grievously wounded but managed to survive. It was August 10th, 1635, the feast of St Lawrence. He was taken home to Hériménil.

**Seeking God and his call** - Nicolas was now twenty-one, ill and with time to reflect. While his body was recovering, his soul too was being healed. His 'profound insight' returned, and he realised that God was waiting for him. Nicolas decided to make a break with the past. As soon as he was able, he went to live with a hermit. However, the eremitical experience came to nothing; solitude did not give him what he was hoping for. Prayer is not so much a question of exterior solitude as of interior silence and attentiveness to God. And Nicolas did not yet know how to pray. He next worked as a lackey in Paris, but deep down he was not satisfied. He had no idea what path to take. He asked God this question every time he visited Notre-Dame Cathedral.

Towards the middle of June 1640, Nicolas found his definitive place: the Carmelite monastery in the rue de Vaugirard. Already in the convent was his maternal uncle, John, a lay brother who would be his spiritual adviser. Nicolas, too, entered as a lay brother. Later, he would explain his motivation in the religious life, describing himself here in the third person:

*You will see that 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 who deserves infinitely more besides. (L 1)*

Two months after entering Carmel, Nicolas received the habit and his new name, Lawrence of the Resurrection. This new life, then, was his second conversion.

**Rough by nature, sensitive by grace** - Brother Lawrence was good company. As his friend Beaufort tells us:

*Brother Lawrence's virtue never made him harsh. His heart was open, eliciting confidence, letting you feel you could tell him anything, and that you had found a friend... What he said was simple, yet always appropriate, and made good sense. (W 3)*

He was, added Beaufort, open and welcoming, a person who inspired confidence, and very human: with his brothers in the monastery, with workmen, with the poor people who came to the door, and with anyone who asked for advice - including, for example, the future Archbishop of Cambrai, Fénelon, who wrote to a countess in these words: 'Brother Lawrence was rough by nature yet sensitive by grace. This mixture was admirable and revealed God present in him.' Beaufort mentions Lawrence's 'rough exterior' (W 3) and we can glimpse something of it in his very direct words to a Reverend Mother: 'I am surprised you haven't let me know what you think of the book I sent you [on the practice of the presence of God]. You must have received it. Put it diligently into practice in your later days. Better late than never' (L 4).

**Prayer and daily living** - When he entered the convent, Brother Lawrence had much to learn and adapt himself to the Rule, community life, two hours a day of silent prayer in the school of Teresa, and the works of John of the Cross of which Lawrence was to have a deep understanding. Soon after his profession at the age of twenty-eight, he was given responsibility for the kitchen an enormous task, for there were over a hundred brothers.

Teresa of Avila has described silent prayer as an intimate exchange with a divine Friend who we know loves us (L 8:5), and to whose presence we return again and again, with humble patience and loving determination. At the beginning, of course, we have to learn the art. Brother Lawrence later recounted that he was given methods to follow and subjects on which to meditate. He applied himself to these during the times of prayer, but in the hours outside those periods it was quite different:

*the rest of the day even during my work [I applied myself carefully) to the practice of the presence of God who was always near me, often in the very depths of my heart. (L 2)*

That is where his praying heart was drawing him: to the living God of love, present in the depths of our heart. Gradually, this attraction to the divine presence began to colour his official hours of silent prayer, too: 'I gradually did the same thing during mental prayer, and this gave me great joy and consolation. This is how I began' (L 2). But suddenly there comes a worrying little sentence: 'I will admit that during the first ten years I suffered a great deal' (

**The terrible storm** - Lawrence passed through the terrible 'passive night of the spirit' described by John of the Cross. In the blinding light of the most holy God whom he was approaching, Lawrence could see the disproportion between the poverty of his own actions and what God truly deserves. Lawrence came to despair of ever loving God worthily. He saw his 'past sins always before [his] eyes' (L 2) and he now understood their stupidity and emptiness. He had received 'lavish graces' from God, and felt that his present torment was the result of his 'presumption, in that I pretended to be all at once where others were able to arrive only with difficulty' (L 2). Was he just living an illusion? Sometimes he felt 'that he was surely damned' (CN 12).

Terrible interior night! 'It seemed to me,' he wrote, 'that all creatures, reason, and God himself were against me, and that faith alone was on my side' (L 2). But faith, which he also called 'confidence' kept on causing a certain reaction: 'During this period I fell often but I got back up just as quickly' (L 2). Lawrence felt suspended between confidence and the temptation to

despair, between heaven and hell, between turning in on himself and having the purest love for God. The solitude he so used to desire now seemed to him a violent sea tossed by furious storms. He confided to Beaufort that his fear of living a lie, and the torments that ensued, were as terrible as the pains of hell.

**Not heaven, not hell - but God!** - At the height of his torment, Lawrence made an unconditional and universal act of abandonment which changed everything forever. Whether lost or saved, he would serve God right up to his last breath! Beaufort has recorded what Lawrence shared with him:

*He had been greatly troubled in spirit, thinking that he was surely damned, and no one in the world could have convinced him otherwise! But he reasoned in this way: 'I entered religious life solely for the love of God and have tried to act for him alone. Whether I be damned or saved, I always want to act purely for his love; at least I can say that, until I die, I will do whatever I can to love him...' (CN 12)*

Beaufort comments: 'he made a firm resolution to bear [his sufferings of soul], not only for the rest of his life, but even for all eternity if it pleased God to so ordain it. "It doesn't matter what I do or what I suffer so long as I remain lovingly united to his will in all things," [Lawrence] said' (EL 26). This act of abandonment, prepared for by many previous ones, had a dazzling effect: 'I 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 centre and place of rest' (L 2). Since then, added Beaufort, 'he thought neither of death, nor of his sins, nor of paradise, nor of hell' (CN 29) - but only of God present and loved. That was the third, and final, conversion of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection.

**The light of faith** - For a long time, Lawrence lived out his union with God in the midst of everyday life. This gives his words all the more credibility. He was a cook - no stranger to stress and deadlines, to people's ingratitude, to monotony and fatigue. Starting from this basis, he invites us to create moments of Presence. Exactly where we are now: in our modern apartment, before a computer, or at the steering wheel in streets that have endless traffic lights and a thousand faces - all of them children of God in need of our prayer. In the last years of his life, Brother Lawrence had three bouts of illness, as well as sciatica, which removed him from the kitchen to the sandal room. He not only kept his sense of humour, but he also always remained vigilant. In a letter, he wrote: 'in the spiritual life, not to advance is to go backwards. Those who are empowered by the breath of the Holy Spirit sail along even when asleep' (L 1). He no longer left the presence of God. Looking back, he could say: 'by the multiplicity of acts of faith and love, I arrived at a state in which it would have been just as impossible not to think about God as it was difficult to get used to doing so in the beginning' (EL 30).

Faith had become luminous: 'I see [God] in such a way that I can sometimes say, "I no longer believe, I see, for I experience what faith teaches"' (L 11). Just before his death at the age of seventy-seven, he wrote: 'I hope for the merciful grace of seeing [God] in a few days' (L 16). He died six days later, on February 12th, 1691. Now he is in the presence of God for all eternity.

*This article was written by a Belgian Carmelite, Conrad De Meester, on the lay brother we might call 'the mystical cook of Paris' – in it, he brings alive the figure of Brother Lawrence, the spiritual adventure of his life, and his message of God's abiding presence.*