



# Monastic Musings

## *Living in and Practicing the Presence of God*

Winter 2015

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### *Another New Year!*

*by: Right Reverend Barb Martzall*



Another new year has arrived! As I sit here writing to all of you, I wonder just what this year will bring forth. The weather has already been strange. So many things around us seem out of sync compared to when we were younger. Many people are just wondering what is happening and what will we see in the future.

Within our monastic community, we continue to focus on our spirituality and staying within the presence of God all of the time. We share our faith and spirituality with those who seek us out.

Each of us approaches our spirituality a little differently, but then that is how we have built the community. We presently keep our daily prayer life and readings based on the Northumbria Community. Each of us finds peace, enrichment, and enjoyment in exploring different spiritual teachings of different faiths of the world. You will find us bringing those ideas into our personal life along with the teaching within the newsletter.

So let me welcome you to 2015 and pray that it will be a very good year for you!

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### *“My God, Here I Am, All Yours”*

*by Rev. Myrella LeClair*

Brother Lawrence knew that he continually had to remind himself that God was over him, under him, in him, and with him at all times. He also knew that to actualize that, he had to move from the concept/knowledge of God to the experience of God’s presence at all times. So, that is why he prayed the prayer “My God, Here I Am, All Yours” continuously. God’s presence is always with us, but we have to remind ourselves of that often.

Just as Brother Lawrence practiced and as Christ taught his Apostles Peter, John, and James in the Garden of Gethsemane, we must be vigilant and watch and pray. We need to pray Brother Lawrence’s simple prayer to constantly remind ourselves that right now – this very instant – that we are always with Him. Each one of us needs to peer into our hearts and minds and discern: Are we ready and willing to be in God’s presence? Are we ready to take that extra step that Christ’s beloved mother did and not only *say* but *mean* “Be it done unto me according to your will”? Or, are we just making half-hearted attempts?

Practicing the presence of God is not a mere outward gesture but an inward commitment to God – an understanding that God created us to dwell with Him forever. Certainly during the

Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year seasons, we express our outward beliefs through festivities, gift giving, and good will. During the Advent period, we anticipate the rebirth of Christ in our hearts while at Christmas we rejoice that Christ is in our midst. All is well! We sense the



holiness and peace and make an extra effort to extend that good will through New Year's Day and beyond, even making resolutions to do so. God is with us and we are with God – in His presence – and then just as quickly, the festivities are over; the decorations are taken down and stored, and we go back to living lives based on our judgments/perceptions – our own illusions. It only takes an instant to turn to God and say “My God, Here I Am, All Yours” to know that the Kingdom is within and that our Creator is always with us and in us – we are one.

This simple prayer needs to be heartfelt and sincere so that whenever our perceptions allow anger, judgment, and negativity to surface, we can quickly and resolutely return to God's presence, allowing peace, joy, and mercy to arise. We bring forth God's Light to dispel not only our own self-created darkness but that of all creation – just as Christ did and still does.

Practicing the presence of God is a choice that each one of must make. Are you willing to make that choice this year? Do not be discouraged when you fail in your commitment. God is eternally patient with us and overlooks our failures. Shouldn't we be willing to do so not only of ourselves but also of others and just return to the Presence of God this very moment? Let our resolution for 2015 be to practice spiritual mindfulness: “Here I am, Lord!” At every moment, I live and move in You. I am present to You just as you are forever present to me! “My God, Here I Am, All Yours”!

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### *Lesson from St. Nikita of Novgorod*

*By Fr. Ron Lahti*

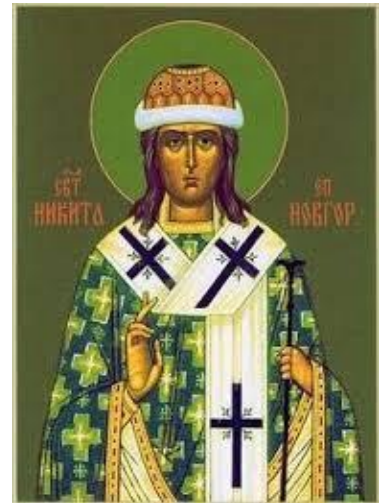
St. Nikita (Nikita is the more Russian transliteration of the saint's name - Nicetas is the more Greek transliteration) of Novgorod (+1109) began his religious life by entering the great Kiev Caves Monastery. His spiritual father was the holy abbot Nikon. Very shortly after beginning his monastic endeavors, he developed a deep, all-consuming desire to become a hermit and seek the heights of spirituality. He approached his spiritual father with his idea. Abbot Nikon told the young monk he should stay in community, learn the spiritual life better, and then, when more mature, he could seek the way of the hermits. But Nikita would have none of it, and he persisted in his request, and finally after much cajoling, the elders allowed him to retreat to a hermitage.

Nikita started his spiritual regimen based on the stories of the desert fathers and mothers – eating little, and spending long hours in prayer. Then one day during prayer, a great being of light appeared and announced that he was an angel sent by God to Nikita because of Nikita's great efforts. The angel sat near Nikita during his long prayer rule, apparently joining in the recitations. Eventually, the angel told Nikita, “I will perform your prayer rule for you, so you have time to study the holy writings.” Nikita was overjoyed that his efforts had merited such a gift from God. So Nikita started studying the Bible from the beginning while his faithful companion was seen to be reciting in the corner. Nikita found he miraculously developed the ability to read

Hebrew and study the Hebrew scriptures in depth – another gift from the Almighty for his efforts! Soon Nikita found he was able to memorize most of the Hebrew scriptures.

Nikita was not forgotten, however, by his faithful spiritual father and the other elders of the Kiev Caves Monastery. They started paying Nikita visits and noted his huge advances in learning and memorization. They also noted that Nikita never quoted the Christian scriptures or other Christian writings; in fact, Nikita, they noted, never even mentioned the Name of Jesus. With the spiritual insight honed by years of prayer and spiritual struggle, the elders perceived that Nikita was being held captive by a demonic illusion. The elders went to Nikita's cell and, through prayer, broke the spell and freed Nikita from his deception. The "angelic being" vanished, and Nikita was left by the elders wondering what had happened. Nikita found also that he had forgotten all he had learned and also found he was unable to read or speak Hebrew anymore.

Nikita, now chastened by the ordeal, returned to the monastery and spent several years in prayer and fasting under the tutelage of his spiritual father, eventually growing into a spiritual giant. Nikita was ordained and was named Bishop of Novgorod – in which See he served for many years with many miracles and healings attributed to his prayers. Nikita, it was found, especially had gained a great gift of discernment, and he was known for his ability to recognize and drive out the forces of the evil one.



What have I learned from St. Nikita's life? First, we need to discern and weed out some cultural elements of Russian Orthodoxy. First, and most especially, Russian Orthodoxy has a history of inherent anti-Semitism. Nikita's demonic companion gives him the ability to understand and memorize Hebrew scriptures and the Hebrew tongue, which is presented as being something evil and sinister. Second, Russian Orthodoxy emphasizes to a fault the spiritual father-disciple relationship. Without a spiritual father (staretz), one is doomed to deception and failure according to many Russian writers. Third, the Russian Orthodox, like many traditional Christian traditions, accepted the idea of a literal Satan and "demons" who exist to wreak havoc in believers' lives. Whether we believe in a literal demon coming to attack us, or see "demons" as our own negative, self-defeating tendencies, the point is that there can be forces within us that work against our greater good.

With these elements aside, St. Nikita's experiences have taught me some valuable lessons on the spiritual life. In the beginning, there is Misplaced Zeal. Nikita has the right intentions of seeking God in the most direct and effective way possible; it's just that he placed his zeal ahead of sound counsel and a firm foundation. Jesus gave us the parable of houses built on sand or rock, drawing our attention to setting a firm base, a sure foundation, so the house of our spiritual life will survive the storms of life. I would love to have the glorious experiences of Uncreated Light as St. Seraphim of Sarov did, or travel to the Third Heaven like St. Paul, or experience the healing of minds and bodies like St. Jean Vianney or St. John Maximovitch. These spiritual heights are there for me if I follow the path laid down before us by so many of my spiritual mothers and fathers – one step at a time just as they did.

Second, there is the lesson of Misdirected Focus. As what happens with many in the spiritual life, my focus gets set on my own agendas, my own desires, without seeking God's will. The focus of the spiritual life is not on intellectual greatness, having the biggest congregations, or bringing in the most donations. The focus is always to seek that God's will be done - to seek a relationship with our loving Father-Mother.

Following misdirected focus, I could naturally fall into Misdirected Effort. The more books I read, the more spiritual writers I can quote, the more theories I can master, I could come to believe will bring me closer to God. In the end, my god becomes my learning, my theories. The focus, however, must always be on God – developing a relationship with the loving Holy One. My intellectual pursuits, as good and worthwhile as they might be, can only benefit me if I maintain “orthodoxy” (right worship) and “orthopraxis” (right actions – ethics, social justice, etc.). The “prayer rule” or “Liturgy of the Hours” provides a base from which to build. My days are based in prayer, which then informs my intellectual and other pursuits. As Evagrius of Pontus said, “One who prays is a theologian, and a theologian is one who prays”. In Orthodoxy, theology is not thinking about God – it is describing God as the One we have come to know and love.

Troparion of St Nicetas, Bishop of Novgorod Tone 4

*As one who delighted in abstinence/ and bridled the desire of the flesh/ thou didst sit on the episcopal throne;/ and as a star thou didst enlighten the hearts of the faithful/ by thy radiant miracles./ O Father and Hierarch Nicetas,/ entreat Christ our God to save our souls.*

Kontakion of St Nicetas, Bishop of Novgorod Tone 6

*Thou wast honoured with the office of Archbishop,/ and didst stand before God Most Pure in purity,/ and quench the flames of the city./ Now, O Hierarch Nicetas, entreat Christ our God/ that all Orthodox Christians making supplication may be saved,/ that all may cry to thee: Rejoice, O Hierarch Nicetas .*

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## ***More on the Presence of God***

*by: Right Reverend Barb Martzall*

Fr. Coniaris states in his book, **Discovering God: Through the Daily Practice of His Presence**:

*“Spiritual renewal does not just happen. We have to do something to help make it happen. We have to participate in it. We have to search and think and see and hunt and pray. We have to seek and ask and know.” (Pages 1 -2)*

So you mean I have to do something in order to have the presence of God in my life? Ouch, I thought it just happened since the Bible and theology teach that I am made in the image of God! If one does not recognize that they are made in the image of God, then how can one know the presence of God in their life? We as humans love to pick and choose things within our lives - not that this necessarily wrong if it means it helps us live our lives in a God focused manner. But if we choose not to have God in our life, then how can we expect to lead a life that is God centered.

I love it when I hear people running around saying: “What would Jesus do....?” when really they should be saying: “What DID Jesus say/do...? It really makes a big difference if you study both statements. We can never presuppose what Jesus would say or do in today’s world, but we can take a close look at his teachings and see clearly what He said and how He handled different situations in His life. So many times we “misinterpret” the words of Jesus so that they fit the subject we are dealing with. That is just plain wrong. It is time for all of us to realize that every time we misinterpret Jesus’ words, we are actually making a mistake or sin! Instead we must learn to live in the true presence of God where He will interpret the words and give us the necessary guidance needed.

I have heard so many times, "I can't live a life that is focused on God because I have to work to support myself and/or my family". Well, I think one of the ancient fathers of the Church, Origen, said it very clearly:

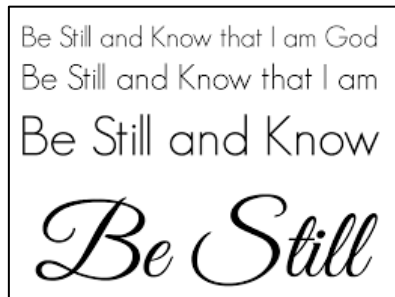
*Incessant prayer can only be understood as a combination of prayer with the whole of the believer's life, avoiding the extremes of all prayer and no work and achieving a balance between the two. In this way, the saint's (person's) entire life is one of great prayer. (Page 4)*

To pray without ceasing is to maintain a constant awareness of the presence of God within each of us. Instead of dedicating parts of the day to God, we dedicate the entire day to Him as we keep Him in our heart in our relationships with others, asking forgiveness when we stray and granting forgiveness when we feel we are offended. We thus let God be our partner in everything we do through the day and night.

We have to realize that in the beginning, our efforts to keep the presence of God constantly in our life will be imperfect. But remember, we learned to walk by scooting first, then creeping, then crawling and the finally we realized we could stand on our feet and move about. But in that process we often bumped into things, fell and even bruised our body. That is the same in bringing the presence of God into our lives. We learn by our mistakes and realize that with each positive step forward, God is with us!

One story I have always loved for teaching the presence of God was told by Archbishop Anthony Bloom. He tells the story about one of the first persons to seek his advice after his ordination to the priesthood. Here is the story:

*She is an elderly woman who claimed that she had been praying almost unceasingly for 14 years and she has never had any sense of God's presence. Fr. Bloom discovered the woman's prayer time consisted of mostly talking to God, so he advised her to set aside 15 minutes a day to sit and just knit before the face of God. Later, the woman reported that when she tried to converse with God she felt nothing, but when she sat quietly, placing herself deliberately in the presence of God, she felt wrapped in God's presence. (Page 7)*



We find this idea to be written about by other writers also. In **Letters from the Desert** by Carlos Carretto, we read:

*"Prayer is not so much a matter of talking as listening; Contemplation is not watching, but being watched by the One who comes to us in love, and who is sovereign over all our encounters and works in this world."*

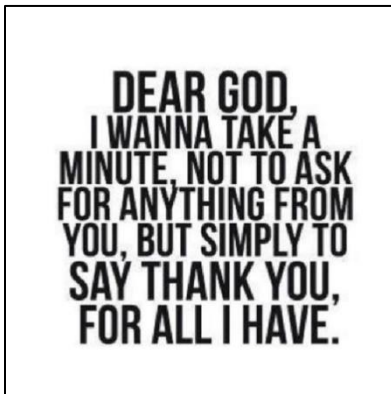
Theophan the Recluse writes:

*"The essential part is to dwell in God, and walking before God means that you live with the conviction ever before your consciousness that God is in you, as he is in everything: you live in the firm assurances that he sees all that is within you, knowing you better than you know yourself. This awareness of the eyes of God looking in your inner being... searching your soul and your heart, seeing all that is there... Is the most powerful lever in the mechanism of the inner spiritual life. Prayer is turning the mind and thoughts that are the words of God. To pray means to stand before God with the mind, mentally to gaze unswervingly at Him, to converse with Him in reverent fear and hope... The principal thing is to stand with the mind in the heart before God and go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life... Behave as you wish, so long as you learn to*

*stand before God with the mind in the heart, for in this lies the essence of the matter." (Pages 8-9)*

Prayer should not be something we do from time to time, but something that we do continually in everything we do during our day. Here is another wonderful story about continually praying:

*"A laywoman who attended a retreat at a monastery wrote: "I began to go to a monastery one morning a week. I joined the sisters for prayer, and then spent two or three hours in their guest room. One sister gently kept suggesting that I simply 'be still and know God,' simply sit there, breathing, relaxing, being attentive, forgetting about myself. It was very appealing – a quiet prayer, where instead of making more words, I just rested in God and was present with God... One day the same sister said, 'We waste time with those we love, And prayer is wasting time with God...' When we love another person, we just want to be with them. What we do or say hardly matters. Could prayer be like that? To come and just sit. To realize that God loves me and simply wants to be with me. Could I accept that nothing might happen, nothing be accomplished? No faults overcome, no insights, no game plans, maybe not even any good feelings. Nothing... We waste time with God – not to be transformed or healed or directed, although we often are – but just to be with him. We do not expect, demand, analyze, or fear failure. We are open to whatever is coming from God... I've learned to relax and to stop evaluating my prayers by their results. I'm not so afraid of wasting time. Prayer is not wanting something from it. Sometimes I remind myself of this by saying, 'God, here I am as I am,' or 'I don't want anything.'" (Page 10-11)*



So what can we glean from the several stories that I have presented to you? Basically this: take time to invite God into your daily life, your entire life, but also don't just talk to Him, take time to also listen! God is your friend and that means give and take in your conversation with Him. Don't just ask Him for things as you will get really disappointed quickly. Instead ask Him to be with you guiding you and directing you throughout your day. But remember, you must listen to His guidance.

May you slowly learn how to bring the presence of God into your life. You will be so surprised at the joy and peace you will start to feel when you allow God to walk openly with you!

(Please note that all quotes are from Fr. Coniaris' book.)

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## **Religious Satire?**

*By Fr. Ron Lahti*

As I write this, 12 people are dead in Paris because the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, they worked for published satirical pieces seen by fundamentalist Moslems as insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Large crowds in several world cities, London, San Francisco and of course Paris, are gathering to show their support carrying signs "*Je Suis Charlie*", "*I Am Charlie*". The western world is reacting to this massacre seeing it as an attack on a cornerstone of a democratic society – Free Speech.

What about satire? AOL online dictionary defines satire as:

*sat·ire* /'sa,tī(ə)r/ noun

1. *The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.*

Satire has been used for millennia to shine a light on political, social, royal, and yes, religious follies. As a rule, satire is irreverent, perhaps shocking, and even crude as it carries out its stated purpose. The point, however, is to highlight folly, vices, weaknesses and hypocrisy of people.

How about satire aimed at religion? First, I would like someone to show me a religious body that was not founded and organized by people. Contrary to what sincerely believing people want to admit, God is not the direct founder of any church, mosque, synagogue, temple, or movement. All religious bodies that we know of were founded by people based on their ideas about God.

So, when someone points out the ridiculous in my faith tradition, they are attacking the image of God that my tradition has created. The mystics of all religious traditions repeat time and again that these images which we cling to so devoutly are the very barriers to an experience of the Reality of God. The publisher of *Charlie Hebdo*, in an interview a few years ago, is quoted as saying "If you cannot laugh at your God, then He's too small". He is not saying God is too small. He is saying one's idea of God might be too small, too limited, too confining – especially if we are willing to kill to protect that idea, that image. I dare say that God would actually celebrate satirical pokes so that people wake up from their too comfortable illusions they have created about God – these are precisely the images God forbade us to create!

These men and people like them in every faith tradition – and yes, every faith tradition has people just like these men – really believe they are somehow honoring their God, their Prophet or their Holy Book. The challenge for us is to see them with compassion, trying to understand the insanity which drives them, while also protecting ourselves from them. We can use this horrendous attack as a wake up call to examine our own faith walk to see if we are cherishing precious idols which we would kill to protect – and then have the faith, and grace, to smash them! There is an old Buddhist saying "If you meet the Buddha on the road...kill him!"

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