

This image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is taken of a fresco painted by Josef Kastner from 1906-1911 in Carmelites church in Döbling, Vienna, Austria. In his new pastoral letter, Bishop David M. O'Connell, C.M., writes that God's relationship with the world he created is one of "loving concern." The Bishop said, "God is all loving and all concerned because God is all good and personally desires the good of all that he has created."

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'Behold, I Am with You Always'

(Matthew 28:20)

A Pastoral Letter on the Presence of God from Bishop David M. O'Connell, C.M.

As the pandemic passes the one-year mark and continues to stretch into 2021, a profound side-effect has emerged: isolation.

The experience not only leaves people separated from each other through illness, social distancing and quarantining, but often leaves them, "wondering where God is," writes Bishop David M. O'Connell, C.M., in his new release: "Behold, I Am with You Always," A Pastoral Letter on the Presence of God."

The title of the letter is taken from the Gospel of Matthew 28:20, which reads, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of time." Formally issued Feb. 22, 2021 on the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, the pastoral letter was published March 1 across diocesan media as a written text and podcast in both English and Spanish. It was also sent to all parishes and schools for distribution in their local communities.

In this, his third pastoral letter as 10th Bishop of Trenton, Bishop O'Connell addresses the painful reality of separation and loneliness, offering guidance to the faithful for developing the assurance of faith and recovering a sense of the presence of God.

The Bishop also remembers those for whom "social distancing has been their way of life for a long time and not by choice: "... The poor, the outcast, the bullied, the marginalized, those living alone, 'quarantined' for whatever the reason. Social distance and isolation are sentences imposed by society upon them, without parole. ... We must not forget them."

The Pastoral Letter is available in English and Spanish, as both text and audio podcast. To learn more, visit: dioceseoftrenton.org/pastoral-writings

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A Pastoral Letter on the Presence of God from Bishop David M. O’Connell, C.M.

INTRODUCTION

Our experience of the pandemic this past and current year has introduced a new phrase into our everyday vocabulary: “social distancing.” As it is commonly understood, social distancing is the practice of increasing the physical space between individuals and decreasing the frequency of physical contact to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. Social distancing is being promoted, advocated and even required at virtually every place people are accustomed to gathering together, including churches.

It comes as no surprise that our “social distancing” or, when necessary, “quarantining” from one another can and does increase our

feelings of isolation, even if only temporarily. We are, after all, “social beings” by nature and “it is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18).

“We can choose to be alone but we rarely, if ever, plan to stay that way.”

Under certain circumstances, being alone is not always a bad thing. In fact, sometimes it can be a good or even preferable thing that provides a break from the busyness of daily life

and work, some peace of mind, some space, some time just to think. We can choose to be alone but we rarely, if ever, plan to stay that way. Apart from the occasional hermit, even monks in a monastery or nuns in a cloister live in community with others.

When forced upon us as is the case in the current pandemic, social distancing, quarantining, and isolation – being alone for extended periods of time – can give rise to loneliness. Mental health professionals have indicated that such an altered experience so different from normal life can “do things to a person’s head.” They advise us to “keep in touch” with others as best we can.

That is advice worth heeding, especially important for children and young people deprived of in-person school settings or other interactive activities. It is also especially important for the elderly and those who are sick. Let’s face it, “keeping in touch” is important for everyone.

In my ministry as a priest, I have encountered many people for whom “social distancing” has been their way of life for a long time and not by choice. Society has left them alone. The homeless sleeping on the streets of our cities. It’s so easy to pass them by. The elderly abandoned to facilities and who never have a call or a visit from anyone. Drug addicts wandering from fix to fix, living in their own isolated world. The poor, the outcast, the bullied, the marginalized, those living alone, “quarantined” for whatever the reason. Social distance and isolation are sentences imposed by society upon them, without parole. We might be tempted to think, “Where is God?” in all this.

Of course, there is a big difference between individuals in this latter group and those suffering from the virulence of the current pandemic. And, yet, COVID victims, their families and the medical professionals who care for them may also be tempted to wonder where God is. Hopefully, however, they will recover and masks and social distancing will prevent others from getting sick. Hopefully, they will witness people getting back to work and economic recovery, back to school and back to recovering some degree of normalcy in their lives. Hopefully, vaccines will fulfill their purpose as they become more available. As a result, the presence of God may become evident to them once again. But what about those I mentioned isolated by society? The social distancing occasioned by the circumstances of their lives pre-dates the pandemic and probably will be around after it ends. We must not forget them.

Acknowledging the “generous and heroic” response of health-care personnel throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis recently wrote, “The dedication of those who even in these days, are working in hospitals and healthcare facilities is a ‘vaccine’ against

individualism and self-centeredness and demonstrates the most authentic desire that dwells in the human heart: to be close to those who are most in need and to spend oneself for them.” He observed that “in the presence of such self-giving, the whole of society is challenged to bear even greater witness to love of neighbor and care for others, especially the weakest” (Pope Francis, “Letter to Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life,” Feb. 20, 2021).

» God is all loving and all concerned because God is all good ...”

and everywhere. God is never distant. We need to recover or, perhaps for the first time, develop a sense of God’s presence.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

I am dating myself here but, growing up in Catholic school, my classmates and I studied the Baltimore Catechism. We memorized the exact answers to its questions and were quizzed daily in religion class: “Who is God?” “What is God?” “Where is God?” and so forth. These were among its first lessons as the Catechism mapped out the fundamentals or “basics” of our Catholic faith. Few questioned such pedagogy at the time but there has been “a lot of water under the bridge” since then. And while teaching methodologies frequently change, fundamental truths do not.

I grew up believing in God. I can honestly say that I have never doubted God’s existence, not even slightly, although I have met people who have and who do. Of course, I have wondered about some things at times and have raised some questions over the years but, rather than doubt or deny, I addressed my wonderment and questions *to* God, to God in whom I believe and trust with every fiber of my being.

My purpose in writing this pastoral letter is not an attempt to prove the existence of God or to convince non-believers. Libraries are filled with the writings of saints, philosophers, theologians and scholars of religious thought over the millennia who have put such proofs and demonstrations forward. They can easily be found, read, considered and debated by anyone interested.

I write simply as a believer and a pastor of other believers in the Catholic Church to affirm the fundamental and non-negotiable belief that we share, namely, that God exists. God’s existence is the beginning and the goal of every human life, even those who deny or doubt. God created the world and everything in it and made human beings in his own image. There is, therefore, a relationship between God and his entire creation, between God and us.

If God exists – and that is true whether people believe it or not – then God is present, all present – omnipresent. And if God is omnipresent, then God is all powerful – omnipotent. And if God is omnipresent and omnipotent, then God is all knowing – omniscient. And if God is omnipresent and omnipotent and omniscient, then his relationship with the world he created – and us within it – is one of ongoing awareness, watchfulness, interest and – dare I say it – loving concern. It’s personal. God is all loving and all concerned because God is all good and personally desires the good of all that he has created.

Then what about evil? Well, that’s on us and our free-will

choices, not God.

Atheists, agnostics and other “scientific” doubters can go after any or all of these assertions but, in the end, the best they can come up with is a denial or doubt about their “belief” in God, something that says more about them than about God.

For my part and for many Catholics who share my beliefs and convictions in and about God, I am not focused on proving anything – I am focused upon faith, “confident assurance concerning things hoped for and conviction about things unseen” (Hebrews 11:1). God’s existence and faith in God’s presence is the starting point of everything. Thirteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: “I am as sure as I live that nothing is so near to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to myself. My existence depends upon the nearness and the presence of God.”

PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The story is told of a young boy holding a violin case in hand, walking down 5th Avenue in New York City. He felt a little lost and he stopped a passerby (allegedly it was the comedian Jack Benny) and asked him, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Without missing a beat, the passerby replied, “Practice, practice, practice!”

For the believer, we might ask a similar question, “How do I get to know God in my life?” The answer is the same, “Practice, practice, practice!” How does one “practice” getting to know God?

When I was a novice in the Vincentian seminary (a long time ago!), “spiritual reading” was a requirement on the daily schedule. You may think it a bit peculiar to “require” spiritual reading on a schedule for seminarians, but those entrusted with our priestly formation, following the rule of St. Vincent de Paul (1580-1660), were trying to impress upon us from the earliest stages of our training the importance of developing good daily spiritual habits, a task that required “practice.”

One of the books I remember reading with great interest was written by a lay brother in a Carmelite monastery in Paris. His name was Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) and the book that was



In his pastoral letter, Bishop O’Connell shares the spiritual lessons of Carmelite Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, who had been assigned the most menial tasks in the monastery. Brother Lawrence had written that he could find God in the midst of his pots and pans, adding, “Our actions should unite us with God when we are involved in our daily activities, just as our prayers unite us with him in our quiet devotions.” Unsplash Image/ Scott Umstatterd

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assembled from letters after his death was entitled “The Practice of the Presence of God.” Born Nicolas Herman and never educated, he was raised in a family of peasants and entered the army as a young man to provide himself with the necessities of life. He tells the story of one day seeing a tree without leaves in a battlefield. His mind began to wonder and he imagined that same tree three months hence in full flower. He saw that tree as a symbol of how God transforms the human heart, over time.

After Nicolas joined the Carmelites, the superior gave him the name “Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection” and assigned him the most menial tasks in the monastery, ultimately kitchen work washing pots and pans. Little time passed before Brother Lawrence began to display great spiritual wisdom to his brother monks and visitors to the monastery, even finding and pointing out the presence of God in the midst of his “pots and pans.” “Lord of all pots and pans and things,” he prayed, “make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!”

It quickly became clear that Brother Lawrence possessed an extraordinary intimacy with God in his lowly, ordinary monastic life. Unaccustomed to keeping quiet, Brother Lawrence often explained that it was simply due to an abiding spiritual “practice of the presence of God.” He would say, “All we have to do is to recognize



Focusing on the plight of so many who have been forced into isolation by the pandemic, or who were abandoned well before coronavirus restrictions, Bishop O’Connell observes, underscores the importance of staying connected with one another and united with God in the everyday of our lives. Catholic News Service photo

God as being intimately within us. It was a serious mistake to think of our prayer time as being different from any other.

“Our actions should unite us with God when we are involved in our daily activities, just as our prayers unite us with him in our quiet devotions. It isn’t necessary that we stay in church in order to remain in God’s presence. We can make our hearts personal chapels where we can enter anytime to talk to God privately.”

I have never forgotten that little “spiritual reading” book or the lessons of that humble Carmelite brother.

“The most holy and necessary practice in the spiritual life,” he wrote, “is the presence of God – that is, every moment to take great pleasure that God is with you. That means finding constant pleasure in His divine company, speaking humbly and lovingly with him in all seasons, at every moment, without limiting the conversation in any way.”

Notice how he speaks of his “practice:” taking pleasure in God’s presence and company; speaking to God humbly and lovingly all the time, without “limiting” the conversation.

God is always present and always present everywhere in our lives. I can’t repeat that enough. Sometimes we don’t realize it or think about his presence, but God is near us, next to us, with us, within us always.

“We should fix ourselves firmly in the presence of God by conversing all the time with him,” Brother Lawrence advised. “We should feed our soul with a lofty conception of God and from that derive great joy in being his. We should put life in our faith. We should give ourselves utterly to God in pure abandonment, in temporal and spiritual matters alike, and find contentment in the doing of his will, whether he takes us through sufferings or consolations.”

What Brother Lawrence is describing in his reflections on the practice of the presence of God is really the practice of prayer, the practice of praying. I am quite sure, as has been my experience frequently, that people approach priests and other spiritual leaders to ask for their guidance in prayer. Like the Apostles who turned to the Lord Jesus and asked, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1), so people turn to spiritual leaders with a similar request.

Brother Lawrence’s response is a good start: “Prayer is nothing else than a sense of God’s presence.” To “think” of God is the beginning of prayer, it establishes our awareness of his presence, already there. To want to get to know God more deeply and experience his presence is a good way to continue our prayer. He is already with us. To express our need for God keeps us conscious of the purpose of prayer. He is already present – listening – and will answer us.

But prayer does not just happen. It takes practice. And not only when we want something or when something is going wrong in our lives. We can and should pray all the time because God is present all the time, loving us.

Brother Lawrence wrote, “You need not cry very loud; he is nearer than we think.” Long before he lived and wrote, the Psalmist proclaimed, “Before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you knew the whole of it (Psalms 139: 4).” Keep the conversation going in the presence of God, in attitude, in thought, in desire and in word. Remember St. Paul’s exhortation in his *Letter to the Thesalonians*: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all

» “God is always present, and we can always talk to him in prayer.”

Bishop O’Connell writes that “Prayer is the practice, the ‘habit’ of living always in the presence of God. . . . When we wake, it takes precious little effort to make ourselves aware that God has given us the gift of another new day. Make it a practice to say, ‘Good morning,’ to God, to say, ‘Thanks for the gift of today.’”

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circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)! Practice the presence of God!

LIVING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The human body needs at least three basic things to survive. Human beings can last a little while without food and water but life would end very quickly without oxygen. St. Padre Pio famously stated, “Prayer is the oxygen of the soul.” Let me take that a bit deeper: the practice of the presence of God is the oxygen of prayer. Trappist abbot and monk Father Thomas Aquinas Keating (1923-2018) put it this way: “We rarely think of the air we breathe, yet it is in us and around us all the time. In similar fashion, the presence of God penetrates us, is all around us, is always embracing us.”

For the believer, it’s not enough to occasionally think about God. For the believer, it’s not enough to “say” a prayer once in a while. If that were the case, our spiritual lives would not last very long. Prayer is the practice, the “habit” of living always in the presence of God. That’s what prayer is and that’s where prayer leads us!

It begins the moment we open our eyes in the morning. God has been present throughout the night while we sleep. When we wake, it takes precious little effort to make ourselves aware that God has given us the gift of another new day. Make it a practice to say, “Good morning,” to God, to say, “Thanks for the gift of today.”

I am fortunate as a bishop to have a chapel in my house where the Lord Jesus dwells in the Blessed Sacrament, always present and waiting for me. Not many Catholic believers have that luxury, grace and blessing. I walk down the stairs – grateful to God in my case that I can still walk – and the first thing I see is the twinkle of the chapel’s red sanctuary lamp, reminding me of the presence of God, inviting me to come in and offer a prayer for the day that lies ahead and the people I will meet. Most times I know the schedule that awaits me although, more often than not, there will always be surprises and interruptions. Morning prayers and Masses precede me out the door but I take the presence of God with me in my mind and heart.

The experience of the pandemic this year has given me much

more time than I would ordinarily have to be more decisively focused on the presence of God. A lot of social distancing accompanies my work these days but not distance from God. If there are any benefits to the pandemic – and there are not too many – more time for prayer and reflection has been one. God sees my face though the mask I wear and I see his face beyond the masks worn by others.

Masked or not, I hope and pray that the requirements of the pandemic – and the pandemic itself – have not kept people from seeing the face of God and sensing his presence, even when others have had to keep their distance. God is always present and we can always talk to him in prayer. We *need* to pray, perhaps now in our distanced, isolated moments more than ever.

Earlier last year at the height of the coronavirus’ virulence, difficult decisions had to be made that weighed heavily on us all in the Diocese of Trenton. A dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days was granted to all the faithful indefinitely. Churches, chapels and parish centers were temporarily closed to the public and devotions cancelled. Sacraments were postponed and the form for Confessions and funerals altered. People in hospitals and nursing homes had limited access to the Sacraments. Masses were live-streamed and Holy Communion was only received spiritually. Holy Week and Easter were celebrated in churches but without a congregation present. We had to participate virtually!

By mid-May 2020, churches and chapels re-opened with precautions followed and, after several weeks of parking lot or outdoor Masses, public indoor Masses resumed, again with precautions and occupancy limits followed. Despite all these limitations and inconveniences, however, two things remained constant: the presence of God and the opportunity to pray. God did not abandon us as some have suggested – never! The Church did not abandon us, as others have suggested – never! We continue to need “spiritual oxygen” so that our souls might keep breathing at a difficult time. We simply were called upon as believers – as has often happened in the Church’s history and still happens in parts of the world – to make spiritual sacrifices and to adapt and adjust our spiritual ways of living in the presence of God.

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Again, I think of Brother Lawrence who wrote: “Do not always scrupulously confine yourself to certain rules, or particular forms of devotion, but act with a general confidence in God, with love and humility.” Recalling moments of his own spiritual struggles, Brother Lawrence shared, “I did not pray for any relief, but I prayed for strength to suffer with courage, humility and love ... Love sweetens pain; and when one loves God, one suffers for His sake with joy and courage.”

He observed, “The world appears very little to a soul that contemplates the greatness of God.” To live in the practice of the presence of God enables us, as believers, to truly contemplate Him in his greatness as we put our whole trust in God and make a total surrender of ourselves to Him.”

Prayer doesn't change God. Prayer, living in the presence of God, changes us.

CONCLUSION

The most frequent requests I receive from people as Bishop are for prayers. Not a day goes by without someone asking me to pray for him/her, for their relatives or friends, for the sick or the dead or for some other special intention. I can honestly say that every promise of prayer I make, I fulfill. People seem to attach more weight to the prayers of clergy and religious and take more comfort in their assurance. I consider it not only an obligation I take on but also an honor and a privilege. But I believe prayer is prayer, and prayers are answered, no matter who is offering the prayer.

I feel great joy when someone approaches me to say that the intention for which prayers were asked and offered was answered! “My child recovered. My husband found a job. My son got accepted to college. My daughter met a nice Catholic boy. We sold our house. I have found peace” – the list goes on. “God answered our prayers!”

Occasionally, however, I encounter someone who laments the opposite result: “God did not answer my prayer.” In such instances, they may say their faith in God has been shaken, their prayers were a waste of time. Such comments sadden me.

God answers all our prayers. But, sometimes the answer is “no.” God has his reasons and sees circumstances and consequences differently than we do. “Thy will be done” we say so often in the Lord's Prayer. How often do we mean it?

Here's the point. Prayer is not a matter of simply calculating “wins and losses” before God. It is important for us as believers, rather, to place ourselves in God's presence wherever we may be and to lift up our lives, our feelings, our needs, our hopes and plans, our loved ones to God in prayer. And, then, let go in the presence of God. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

I have many things I “pray for” – many people, many intentions, many needs. But my underlying prayer in all these prayers is for me and those for whom I pray to seek God's will, to accept God's will, to do God's will, to find peace in God's will – even in times of disappointment – and to continue to live in the presence of God. That takes practice.

I have not mentioned here the Eucharist, the greatest of all prayers and the epitome of the presence of God in the Lord Jesus – the “source and summit of the Christian life” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 11). Neither have I dwelt upon the Holy Scriptures or mentioned the Rosary, Stations, chaplets, novenas, personal devo-

tions or other prayers Catholics have recited from childhood or learned later in life. These are all texts and wonderful prayers that draw us deeply into the presence of God and I am very aware of and grateful for their place in sustaining and deepening the spiritual life of the Catholic believer.

I have chosen here, rather, to write about the origin, essence and goal of all prayer: God himself and placing ourselves in his presence. Awareness of God and his eternal presence is what gives all our “prayers” their meaning and significance. It “makes prayer.”

In my times of prayer, I often imagine and picture myself walking with the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus. They were discussing so many things about the Lord Jesus, his final days with them in Jerusalem and his Passion and Death. Suddenly, the Crucified and Risen Lord was present with them. They were not anticipating his presence and they did not recognize him until he revealed his presence later in “the breaking of the bread.” Then, as suddenly as he came, he left their sight.

It was then, having recognized and experienced the Lord's presence, that they observed, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us” (Luke 24:32)?

Prayer is always an “Emmaus moment” for us. Until we let ourselves become aware of God's presence, until we listen and talk to him on whatever “roads” we are traveling in life, we are not “connecting” in prayer. It's that simple.

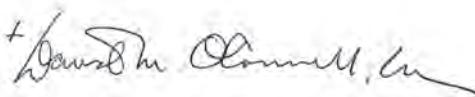
The “take away” from this pastoral letter is this: If we let ourselves meet God where he is – everywhere in our life – then we can be sure he will meet us where we are. That meeting, again and again and every time and place it occurs, is prayer if we live in the presence of God.

After the Resurrection, the Lord Jesus spent time again with those he loved most in the world. And when the time came for him to return to his Heavenly Father, he promised his Apostles and all of us: “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of time” (Matthew 28:20). He has kept his promise.

As I bring this pastoral letter to a close, please join me, in the presence of God, in saying this prayer attributed to St. Patrick:

As I arise today, may the strength of God pilot me, the power of God uphold me, the wisdom of God guide me. May the eye of God look before me, the ear of God hear me, the Word of God speak for me. May the hand of God protect me, the way of God be before me, the shield of God defend me, the host of God save me. May Christ shield me today. Christ with me. Christ before me. Christ in me. Christ beneath me. Christ above me. Christ on my right. Christ on my left. Christ when I lie down. Christ when I sit. Christ when I stand. Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me. Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me. Christ in every eye that sees me. Christ in every ear that hears me. Amen.

My sisters and brothers, live in the presence of God!



Most Reverend David M. O'Connell, C.M., J.C.D.
Bishop of Trenton
February 22, 2021 • Feast of the Chair of St. Peter

» “Prayer, living in the presence of God, changes us.”