

Frank Laubach's Letters by a Modern Mystic

From: Christian Spirituality, edited by Frank Magill and Ian McGreal, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988, pp. 516- 520). Page numbers in "<>" refer to this volume. Author: Frank C. Laubach (1884-1970)

A Pennsylvanian trained at Princeton, Union Theological Seminary, and Columbia University (Ph.D. in sociology, 1915), Laubach went to the Philippines under the American Board of Foreign Missions. After fourteen years of successful teaching, writing, and administration at Cagayn and Manila, he realized in 1929 his long-standing ambition of settling among the fierce Moros, an Islamic tribe on Mindanao. There, in the village of Lanao, he underwent a remarkable series of experiences of God, and simultaneously developed a technique for reducing the Moro language to writing, with symbols closely correlated to their spoken words. This not only made it possible to teach them to read in only a few hours, but permitted them immediately to teach others. The famous "Each One Teach One" program was born, and with the generalization of his linguistic methods the foundation was laid for his worldwide efforts to promote literacy, beginning with India in 1935. During his last thirty years Laubach was an international presence in literacy, religious, and governmental circles. His personal contacts with President Truman were thought to be partly responsible for "point four" in Truman's inaugural address of 1949, sponsoring a "bold new program ... for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" of the world.

Type and subject of work: Excerpts from a series of letters dated from January 3, 1930 through January 2, 1932. Though derived from letters, this book is in the lineage of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, being a narrative of Laubach's ascent into the life of active union with God.

First published: 1937

Major Themes: <517>

1. *Submission to the will of God means cooperation with God in the moment-to-moment activities that make up our daily existence.*
 2. *This cooperation is achieved through continuous inner conversation with God.*
 3. *That conversation in turn is, from our side, a matter of keeping God constantly before the mind.*
 4. *One learns to keep God constantly in mind by experimentation, by trying various experiential devices, until the habit of constant God-thought is established.*
 5. *Then God permeates the self and transforms its world and its relations to others into God's field of constant action, in which all of the promises of Christ's gospel are realized in abundance of life.*
 6. *It is possible for all people under all conditions to establish this habit if they make constant effort and experiment within their peculiar circumstances to discover how it can be done.*
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Two years prior to his transforming experiences of 1930, Laubach found himself profoundly dissatisfied in the realization that after fifteen years as a Christian minister he still was not living his days "in minute by minute effort to follow the will of God." He then began trying to "line up" his actions with the will of God every few minutes. His confidants at the time told him he was seeking the impossible. But in 1929 he began to try living all his waking moments "in conscious listening to the inner voice, asking without ceasing, 'What, Father, do you desire said? What, Father, do you desire done this minute?...'" In his view, this is exactly what Jesus did.

Laubach did not fall into the trap of merely trying to achieve his goal. Rather, he understood the necessity of learning how, of spiritual method. He was, in fact, a very subtle and realistic experimentalist, and regarded himself as fortunate to be living in a "day when psychological experimentation has given a fresh approach to our spiritual problems." Thus he experimented for a few days by taking enough time from each hour to give intensive thought to God. Again, "disgusted with the pettiness and futility of my unled self," he experimented with "feeling God in each movement by an act of will — willing that He shall direct these fingers that now strike this typewriter — willing that He shall pour through my steps as I walk." Again, he wished to "compel his mind" to "open straight out to God." But to attain this mental state often required a long time in the morning. Therefore he determined not to get out of bed "until that mind set, that concentration upon God, is settled." He found that great determination was required to keep the mind on God. But he also found it quickly getting easier, and hoped that "after a while, perhaps, it will become a habit, and the sense of effort will grow less."

In the most subtle passage in these letters — so far as the "mechanisms" of holding God before the mind are concerned — Laubach deals with the question of whether it is possible to have contact with God all the time. Can we think his thoughts all the time? Must there not be periods when other things push God out? Laubach's response to this issue should be fully quoted, for it gives us the heart of his understanding of the constant conscious hold on God. Admitting that he once thought there must be periods when God is excluded, he continues:

... But I am changing my view. We can keep two things in mind at once. Indeed <518> we cannot keep one thing in mind more than half a second. Mind is a flowing something. It oscillates. Concentration is merely the continuous return to the same problem from a million angles. We do not think of one thing. We always think of the relationship of at least two things, and more often of three or more things simultaneously. So my problem is this: Can I bring God back in my mind-flow every few seconds so that God shall always be in my mind as an after-image, shall always be one of the elements in every concept and percept?

I choose to make the rest of my life an experiment in answering this question.

The tremendous results of this experiment are found in the narrative of these letters. They are elaborated more systematically and practically in the *Game with Minutes* (1961), where the method was reduced to calling God to mind for at least one second out of each minute. But the quotation given contains the psychological principles back of Laubach's method for achieving active union with God, constantly abiding in the abundant life.

Within weeks of beginning his experiments he began to notice differences. By the end of January 1930, and with much still to learn about his method, he had gained a sense of being carried along by God through the hours, of cooperation with God in little things, which he had never felt before. "I need something, and turn around to find it waiting for me. I must work, . . . but there is God working along with me." He discovered by March 9 that "This hour can be heaven. Any hour for any body can be rich with God. In a manner familiar to the mystics of all ages, we find him saying to God: "And God, I scarce see how one could live if his heart held more than mine has had from Thee this past two hours." He experienced difficulties and failures in maintaining his consciousness of God, but in the week ending May 24 he began to experience a further dimension in his conversations with God. In a moment of immersion in natural beauty, "I let my tongue go loose and from it <519> there flowed poetry far more beautiful than any I ever composed. It flowed without pausing and without ever a failing syllable for a half hour." This brought him a deeper awareness of God in beauty and in love.

Reflecting upon the results of two months of strenuous effort to keep God in mind every minute, he exclaims: "This concentration upon God is strenuous, but everything else has ceased to be so!" That was especially true of his relations to the Moros, who, seeing the difference in him, took him entirely into their hearts and lives, loving, trusting, and helping him without regard to their cultural and religious differences. Two of the leading Moslem priests went about the area telling their people that Laubach would help them to know God. He never pretended to be anything but a follower of Jesus, but he studied the Bible and the Koran with the priests and the people and prayed in their services with them. Observing this, one priest said, "He is Islam," He replied, "A friend of Islam." But the Islamic emphasis upon constant submission seems to have been one factor prompting him to develop his way of being in constant contact with God. He could not endure to see his practice as a Christian fall below the profession of Islam. The inner transformation was substantial and with real outward effects. "God does work a change. The moment I turn to him it is like turning on an electric current which I feel through my whole being." There is a "real presence" that affects other people directly, and that also makes intercessory prayer an exercise of substantial power in cooperation with God.

In the letters after mid-1930 there is a different range of concerns, which predominantly have to do with various practical aspects of the life in union with God. These are further elaborated and beautifully concretized for the varying conditions of life in *Game with Minutes* — which of course was written to guide others as the Letters were not.

Because of Laubach's immense involvement with worldwide social problems, he came to be generally known for his work, not for his inner life. Many of those who have written about him say little about his spiritual side, and obviously do not know what to make of it. But his own words and writings (he published more than fifty books) reveal that he remained primarily a spiritual man — fundamentally living from his moment-to-moment relation to God — to the end of his days. He knew this relation in a way that did not bear many of the external trappings conventionally associated with spirituality. But to observe his effect is to see that he was truly one of those born of the spirit, of the "wind" that invisibly produces visible results (John 3:8).

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RECOMMENDED READING

1. ***Edition used:*** Laubach, Frank C. *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. Foreword by Alden H. Clark. Edited and compiled by Constance E. Padwick. Syracuse, N.Y.: New Readers Press, 1955. First published in 1937.
2. Edwards, Gene, ed. *Practicing His Presence: Frank Laubach and Brother Lawrence*. Goleta, Calif.: Christian Books, 1973. An instructive comparison.
3. Laubach, Frank C. *Christ Liveth in Me* and *Game with Minutes*. Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1961. A practical guide to living with God in mind.
4. ---. *Prayer, the Mightiest Force in the World*. Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1951.
5. ---. *The World Is Learning Compassion*. Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1958. Chapter 7 deals with Truman's "Point Four" referred to earlier.
6. Medary, Marjorie. *Each One Teach One: Frank Laubach, Friend to Millions*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954. An account of Laubach's linguistic methods.