

Grace given, sought, and lived in Union with God

ON THE UNION OF THE SOUL WITH GOD

Brother Lawrence, concerning our practice of our awareness of the presence of God, teaches us:

There are three kinds of spiritual union: the first is habitual, the second is virtual, and the third is actual, i.e., accomplished in the present.

FIRST: Habitual union is when we are united to God solely by grace.

Grace is always being given to us — offered to us simply because God loves us for who we are. It is part of God's plan to be made known in our hearts and minds through his sharing of his life. When we speak of God the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that God is completely spirit, and therefore communicates to us most perfectly in spirit.

From this vantage point, we see God's participation in our lives, and God's desire that we continuously grow in our participation in his life, acknowledging the divine life ALL PEOPLE are called to share.

But at this level, it is solely God acting on our behalf. We are in union with God solely because of his great love for us. It is an awesome awakening to realize that before we ever think of God, God is giving to us. For us to think of God in any manner, God has had to work, offering us his life. This is **habitual union**. For us to exist, it is solely by the grace of God. This discussion has occurred in previous teachings concerning our awareness of the presence of God. All humans are in this union since it does not constitute any human response whatsoever.

SECOND: Virtual union is when we have begun to unite ourselves to God and we remain united with Him as long as we continue our efforts.

The grace of God also provides what we need, the Spirit, the strength, to acknowledge this grace, and to accept the invitation to respond to this grace. Our response is very much what we have discussed during the past eleven weeks — our growing in our aware-

ness of God constantly being present to us.

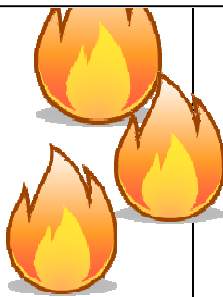
Virtual union is our choosing to be in union with God. As we work at becoming more and more present to the Lord every day, we see how this can become a virtual union. It is not perfect as is God's union with us, since it is very much achieved through our intellect and senses. Nevertheless, it is our human attempt to see God in our lives, and our lives rooted in oneness with God. Our senses and intellect cannot bring us to perfect union with God since this can



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only be achieved through the joining of spirit to Spirit in perfect oneness. This can happen for us, but it is not our doing. It is us “not doing” that makes the difference. (See Actual Union)

Believe it or not, many people never enter into **virtual union** with God since they have never been given to see God in their lives, or they have never sought to understand God in their lives. And for many, union at this level is very minimal, restricted to sudden need.

Notice, Brother Lawrence says “...*as long as we continue our efforts.*” When we choose not to think about, or seek, God, our union with God again goes back to habitual union.

With so many “virtual realities” in our world today, this can make sense. Our virtual union with God cannot equal that of God's perfect union with us. It can virtually mirror that of God's at this level. But we will always be mindful that the ability we have “...*to unite ourselves to God, and remain united with him...*” is God's grace already given to us.

THIRD: Actual union — present, sustained, ongoing union — is the most perfect of the three. As it is 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. On the contrary, it finds itself powerfully excited. Its actions are more lively than those of a fire, more luminous than a sun unobscured by clouds. We must be careful not to be deceived into thinking that this

union is a simple expression of the heart, as in saying, “My God, I love You with all my heart,” or other similar words. No, this union is something indefinable that is found in a gentle, peaceable, spiritual, reverent, humble, loving and utterly simple soul. This “undefinable something” raises the soul and presses it to love God, to worship Him, and yes, even to caress Him with an inexpressible tenderness known only to those who experienced it.



Only a mother can try to explain the feelings associated with child birth. But one mother’s joys and difficulties are not another’s. To think otherwise is absolutely foolish.

Only a father can attempt to explain the feeling of a first son being born. And, similar to a mother, it is his alone.

Only a priest can attempt to explain the many varied emotions and feelings that occur when he celebrates his first mass, or, if maintaining a strong union with God, any mass.

These are pale comparisons to what we understand when **actual union** is being experienced the first time and the four thousandth time. Never are two the same. These are out of our control, since we have allowed for this by removing our intellect, our senses, our words, and our will (other than perhaps willing God’s will) from any active participation. We can claim nothing of what occurs as our own.

But now, unlike habitual union where we are not aware of God’s grace being offered to us, in **actual union** we are very aware of God’s grace, his life, consuming our own. We have chosen to dispose ourselves to this giving by God. We have been united spirit to Spirit in perfect harmony. Remember, “*God did not give us a Spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love...*” (2 Tim 1:7) God is active in these moments, whether they are short-lived or linger with us for a long period of time.

After we have returned to our virtual union, these moments of **actual union** assist us in disposing ourselves again and again to actual union, which may well become more frequent than we could imagine. We are now willing our will to conform to God’s will.

Each time God chooses to bring us to **actual**



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union will be different, so we never need to picture what it was like the last time. Remembering past moments of intimacy with God are never good. And once we have returned to virtual grace, they become our remembrances and thoughts, and are rarely moments of actual union. They are meant to help us move closer to that openness of union, experiencing God as he chooses, when he chooses. They remind us of perfect love shared. “*So be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Matt. 5:48)

FOURTH: All who aspire to union with God should know that everything that can delight the will and is pleasant and delicious to it serves to further this union.

We must all acknowledge that 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 in some way understand God, it can only be through love. There is a great deal of differences between the feelings of the will 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 up at God.

The last line above helps us in this final teaching. St. John of the Cross explains to the student that even willing the will of God may be detrimental to a person’s union with God, since it could easily set up criteria for how God is to be experienced.

God is love. God’s nature can only love. It is God’s will to love completely. “*God is love and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.*” (1 John 4:16).

Brother Lawrence says, “*...the feelings of the will come to an end in the soul...*” meaning that the soul must will to convert feelings to God’s movement, perfect love, which cannot remain within the self. Again, Brother Lawrence instructs us, “*the operation of the will, which is the expression of true love, ends up at God.*” We end up in perfect union with God — not withholding love for ourselves, but in loving as God loves, loving without cost.

Now, the wisdom and knowledge of God are understood — in the heart perfected in love, as God desires for us. Spirit and Truth, necessary for perfect love (see insert #11), show us true life taking shape in the “Hidden Ground of Love” — us living, seeking perfect union in all times.

