

## *The Missionary-Mystic You've Probably Never Heard Of*

I can't remember exactly how I stumbled upon the name of Frank Laubach, years ago. What I do remember is that from the little I read, I was astonished: why had I never heard of this remarkable man before?

Laubach was a Congregational minister, born in Pennsylvania in 1884 and educated in New York at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. In educational circles he is known as a pioneer in literacy work, founding the 'Each One Teach One' movement and publishing materials outlining efficient and attractive means of teaching people to read their native languages. The movement he began has given untold numbers the gift of literacy and his method lives on today. That would be enough of a legacy to do anyone proud.

However he is also known to those who wander in the byways of Christian spirituality for his candid accounts of his lonely struggles as a missionary in a Muslim-dominated part of the Philippines, as he tried to earn the trust of the people around him, to learn their languages and to pray.

He wrote a number of short books, some of them essentially pamphlets. These place him in the all-too-short procession of those who have tried to take seriously the Biblical injunctions to pray constantly. The clearest exposition of his own experience is found in *Letters by a Modern Mystic*, where he records his 're-conversion', his efforts to learn to keep God constantly in his mind throughout the day.

That way of praying was the foundation of his work in the Philippines. He wrote 'If asked my chief difficulty in meeting these Moros [the indigenous people], I should have to reply, "No chief difficulty except to keep ready spiritually". ' He saw the missionary, it seems, foremost not as a preacher to the unconverted but as one who, in the process of ever-deeper conversion, shares himself with others.

That deepening conversion was effected by his efforts to learn to keep God in the forefront of his mind minute by minute. Perhaps the best-known of his writings is *The Game with Minutes*—not a title most people would associate with a book on prayer and one which might incline many to dismiss it, unread, as trivial. In a way, what Laubach proposes in this book is trivial: 'Select a favorable hour; try how many minutes of the hour you can remember God at least ONCE each minute; that is to say, bring God to mind at least one second out of every sixty'. (The syntax of the second clause seems odd, but that is what's in the book.)

Laubach explains the motivation for devising and playing this 'game with minutes' at the very beginning of his pamphlet: 'Few people are getting enough of Christ to save either themselves or the world. Take the United States, for example. Only a third of the population belongs to a Christian church. Less than half of this third attend service regularly. Preachers speak about Christ in perhaps one service in four—thirty minutes a month!' Think he's speaking about our time? He isn't. *The Game with Minutes* was published in 1953. His point still applies, though: how many Christians really abide in Christ for even a few minutes of their day? Laubach's Game was devised to offer us a way of changing that.

Some of his strategies may appeal to some folk but not others, such as keeping a personal scorecard of how often one thinks of God. Others seem so obvious you may

wonder why you haven't been doing them already. For example, he suggests offering a swift prayer for the people you pass by as you're walking down the street. Some people, he reports, walk so that they leave room beside themselves for 'our unseen Friend' and engage in silent conversation with him about the people they meet, saying something like 'Dear Companion, what can we do together for this man whom we are passing?'

Laubach suggests numerous other strategies and in this he differs from the most well-known advocate of constant prayer, Brother Lawrence. Judging from the numerous editions of *Practising the Presence of God* (which imply substantial sales), Lawrence continues to inspire many. I confess this surprises me, because he is more an advocate of constant prayer than a teacher of it. Famous for his saying about the kitchen he worked in, 'God walks among the pots and pans', he never really explains how others can get to the point of constant recollection of God that he obviously had. Laubach (who was clearly familiar with Lawrence's famous work) offers the practical strategies that are absent in the account of his predecessor.

Two of Laubach's books give us a view of the way he lived out what he commended to others: *Learning the Vocabulary of God* and *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. The first is subtitled 'A Spiritual Diary' and is in diary form, with dates and places given for each entry. The 'placements' show the extent of Laubach's travels: from India to Zanzibar, Kenya, Ceylon (as it was), with many entries specifying only what boat he was on. The entries are personal, mostly addressed to God, so effectively prayer, although not adoration or confession, or thanksgiving and often not even petition. Perhaps they are best described as ejaculatory: the spontaneous flow of thoughts and feeling being shared with God. Although written down, these entries give an insight into how Laubach must have practised constant prayer.

*Letters of a Modern Mystic* differs, in that although each one is dated, no places are named. Only the title page tells us these are excerpts of letters written to Laubach's father. Like *Learning the Vocabulary of God*, *Letters* gives its reader a glimpse not only of the life of a remarkable man, but also the habits of his mind and heart and so both provide valuable insight into how one might live out a life of constant prayer, though neither is overtly instructional.

Of a different character is *Prayer: the Mightiest Force in the World*. This volume contains a good deal of practical advice for prayer throughout the day, but also addresses questions many people have about how prayer actually works and how it can be efficacious. Laubach is attending to issues many Christians find perplexing about prayer, which many people scarcely dare voice aloud. Some of these are also issues that those with a great affinity for intercessory prayer should probably be asking themselves, but do not seem to. Some will be turned off by Laubach's comparison of intercessory prayer to telepathy and his confidence that the efficacy of the latter will be scientifically proven in the near future, but whether or not you buy those arguments, Laubach gives a theological account of how intercessory prayer 'works' that merits thoughtful consideration.

All these books would make worthwhile additions to a personal library of spirituality. **Highly Recommended**

*Letters by a Modern Mystic* (also contains *The Game with Minutes*). London: SPCK, 2011.

*The Game with Minutes, Learning the Vocabulary of God and Prayer: the Mightiest Force in the World* are all published by Martino Publishing, Mansfield Centre, Connecticut.