

# The Way of the Heart

# Henri J. M. Nouwen

(Ballantine Books, 1981)

## Introduction

#### The Theme:

• Spiritual transformation through solitude, silence and prayer.

## Henri Nouwen (1932-96).

- A Dutch Catholic priest, professor, theologian, and writer.
- Primary interests: psychology, pastoral ministry, contemplative spirituality and community.
- Involvement with L'Arche.
  - ▶ Jean Vanier (1928-2019).
- The influence of Gordon Allport (1887-1967) and "trait psychology".
- A prolific author:
  - ► The Wounded Healer (1972), The Way of the Heart (1981), In the Name of Jesus (1989), The Return of the Prodigal Son (1992).
- Personal struggles: loneliness and depression.
  - ► A celibate homosexual.

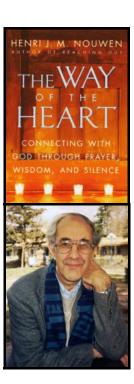
• An antidote to pop Christianity.

# **Prologue**

# ForeThoughts.

- C. S. Lewis: "We live... in a world starved for solitude, silence and privacy, and therefore starved for meditation and true friendship."
- Blaise Pascal: "All evil stems from this that men do not know how to handle solitude."

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#### The Problem... and Solution.

- "Our world has embarked on a suicidal journey." [1]
  - Our souls are being corrupted in the process.
- Two questions:
  - (1) How to make the light shine amid the darkness in our world.
  - (2) How to sustain our focus and energy as ministers of Christ.
- The historical precedent.
  - ► The Desert Fathers (and Mothers).
  - ► Abba Arsenius (4<sup>th</sup> century): "Lord, lead me in the way of salvation."
    - "Flee, be silent, and pray continuously."
  - ► The desert as an escape from "a tempting conformity to the world."
  - ► The desert as a place of refuge, simplicity, solitude, silence, and spiritual regeneration.

#### 1. Solitude

## The Life and Example Anthony (251-356).

- Anthony: "Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor... then come and follow me" Matt. 19:21.
- Twenty years in solitude.
  - "The shell of superficial securities was cracked." [9]
- A fruitful ministry.
  - ► "When he emerged from his solitude, people recognized in him the qualities of an authentic 'healthy' man, whole in body, mind, and soul." [10]
- The example of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74).
- Solitude as the furnace of conversion and transformation. [10]
  - "It is from this transformed or converted self that real ministry flows." [10]

# The Compulsive Minister.

- Thomas Merton in *The Wisdom of the Desert*:
  - "Society... was regarded [by the Desert Fathers] as a shipwreck from which each single individual [person] had to swim for his life...
     These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster." [11]
- Commentary on our society:

•	Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but
	a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get
	entangled and lose our soul The basic question is whether we have not already been
	so deeply molded by the seductive powers of our dark world that we have become blind
	to our own and other people's fatal state and have lost the power and the motivation to
	swim for our lives." [11]

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- Our "compulsive lives."
  - Our craving for happiness and self-fulfillment.
  - ► Symptomatic of our "false self" our ego.

[Note: The ego is *not* our "false" self, but who and what we *really are* in our natural state. The Good News is that our old nature can be *regenerated* and *transformed*.]

- Two enemies of the spiritual life:
  - (1) Anger.
  - (2) Greed.
- Other enemies of the soul:
  - (1) Pride.
  - (2) Fear.
- Anthony's response: Escape from the sinking ship and swim for one's life.

#### The Furnace of Transformation.

- The call to solitude.
  - ► "Without solitude we remain victims of our society." [15]
  - ► The example of Jesus Luke 5:16; Mark 1:12, 35, 45.
  - ► The example of Paul.
- The distortion of solitude.
- The spiritual principle of solitude:
  - "The place of conversion... where the old self dies and the new self is born."
- Stripping away the scaffolding.
  - ► A void "so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, my distractions."
  - ► "As soon as I decide to stay in my solitude, confusing ideas, disturbing images, wild fantasies, and weird associations jump about in my mind..." [18]
- The challenges of solitude.
  - ▶ We must be intentional and creative in terms of our commitment to solitude.
  - ► A special time and place.
  - ► "We have to fashion our own desert where can withdraw every day... Without such a desert we will lose our own soul...." [21]

► In solitude, Christ transforms us into his own image and "frees us from the victimizing

- ► The challenge to persevere.
- The principle of the exchanged life Gal. 2:20.
- Solitude as a place of purification and transformation.
- The end is to know God more intimately to become one with God.

compulsions of the world." [22]	

## A Compassionate Ministry.

- Anthony emergence from solitude.
  - "A compassionate man" who "learned to diagnose the hearts of people." [24]
  - ► A "genuine healthy man."
  - ► A. W. Tozer: Those whose wills have been broken have "a quality about them not known to nor understood by common men. They speak with spiritual authority."
  - Diagnosing human hearts.
  - ► A ministry of compassion.
- The essence of ministry.
  - ► The ability "to enter into solidarity with those who suffer." [25]
  - ► Anthony: "Keep God always before you...."
  - ► Anthony: "Control your tongue and your stomach."
- The great irony: Dying to others.
- Liking and accepting others.
- Solitude and compassion.
  - Knowing and accepting ourselves makes us more understanding and compassionate toward others.
  - "Solitude molds self-righteous people into gentle, caring persons...." [27]
- ► Solitude and salvation.
  - Anthony and his followers, who escaped the compulsions of the world, did so not out of disdain for people but in order to be able to save them.... They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others so long as they floundered about in the wreckage [of their culture]. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had... the power to pull [others] to safety after them." [29ff]

#### Conclusion.

- Spiritual maturity requires intentionality and attentionality.
- Communion with God.
- "The goal of our life is not people. It is God." [32]

#### 2. Silence

#### Introduction.

- An indispensable spiritual discipline.
- Isaac Newton: "Truth is the offspring of silence and unbroken meditation."
- Soren Kierkegaard: "If I could prescribe only one remedy for all the ills of the modern world, I would prescribe silence."

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## Our Wordy World.

- A torrent of words.
  - ► "Wherever we go we are surrounded by words.... [37ff]
- Mental overload.
- It takes time and solitude and silence to process the issues of life.
- Nouwen's thesis.
- Verbal clutter.
- Satan's means to undermine the power of words:
  - (1) Modern advertising.
  - (2) Political propaganda.
  - (3) Postmodern philosophy and the relativization of words.
- The sanctity of words.
  - ► Prov. 17:27.
  - ► Ecc. 6:11.
  - ► Prov. 10:19.
  - ► Malcolm Muggeridge: ""I think the most wonderful sentence ever penned is in the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word....' What a marvelous sentence that is. How tremendous are its implications.... One of the things that appalls me and saddens me about the world today is the condition of words. Words can be polluted even more dramatically and drastically than rivers and land and sea....

"Let me give a striking example. Perhaps the most beautiful of words, the subject of that marvellous thirteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Corinthians, is the word 'love.' Just think of how that word has been polluted and corrupted.... Similarly, words like 'freedom' and 'liberation'[or 'social justice'].... The truth is that if we lose the meaning of words, it is far more serious in practice than losing our wealth or our power. Without our words, we are helpless and defenceless; their misuse is our undoing." [The End of Christendom, p. 2.]

- Three practical purposes of silence:
  - (1) Silence makes us pilgrims.
    - "Silence becomes one of the central disciplines of the spiritual life." [43]
  - (2) Silence guards the fire within.
    - Diadochus: "When the door of the steambath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it." [45]
    - The compulsion to "share".
  - (3) Silence teaches us to speak.
    - "A word with power is a word that comes out of silence." [48]
    - Words that are not rooted in silence are weak and powerless like "a clashing cymbal or a booming gong" 1 Cor. 13:1.

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## The Ministry of Silence.

- The outward focus.
- Solitude, silence, and a deeper spirituality.
- The fundamental purpose of this book.
- The problem of contemporary ministry.
  - "In a society in which entertainment and distraction are such important preoccupations, ministers are tempted to join the ranks of those who consider it their primary task to keep other people busy [and entertained!]."

"Ministers frequently find themselves in fierce competition with people and institutions who offer something more exciting to do than they do." [56]

- The nature of true ministry.
  - ► "But our task is the opposite of distraction: Our task is to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God's active presence in their lives. Hence, the question that must guide all [ministry] is not how to keep people busy, but how to keep them from being so busy that they can no longer hear the voice of God who speaks in silence.

"Calling people together... means calling them away from the fragmenting and distracting wordiness of the dark world to that silence in which they can discover themselves, each other, and God. Thus [true ministry] can be seen as the creation of a space where communion becomes possible and community can develop." [56]

- A challenging task:
  - ► Ministry on the deepest level "requires a strenuous discipline to make our ministry one that leads people into the silence of God." [51]
  - "In this chatty society, silence has become a fearful thing. For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss." [52]
- "Meditative preaching."
  - ► Words "slowly descend from the mind into the heart" which results in transformation.
- Silence and counseling.
  - ► The Holy Spirit is the Divine Counselor.
  - Leading people into the silence of God so they can hear and discern God's voice.

#### Conclusion.

• "In our chatty world, in which the word has lost its power to communicate, silence helps us to keep our mind and heart anchored." [59]

► Silence is "a portable cell that we carry with us wherever we go. From it we speak to

• Our portable cell.

	those in need and to it we return after our words have borne fruit." [60]					
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# 3. Prayer

## Hesychasm.

- Constant communion with God.
  - ► Eph. 6:18 "Pray without ceasing."
  - ► I Thes. 5:17 Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances."
  - ► "The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but of listening to God." [63]
- Hesychia: voluntary stillness so as to commune with God.
  - ► "Be still and know that I am God" Psalm 46:10.

## The Prayer of the Mind (or the Head).

- Discursive prayer.
- Prayer as a one-way monologue.
- Prayer as a mental exercise.

## The Prayer of the Heart.

- Contemplative prayer (meditation).
- Theofan the Recluse: "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart" and there to enter the presence of God.
  - ► "There [in the heart] God's Spirit dwells and there the great encounter takes place." [73]
- "Heart" and "soul."
  - Our core essence.
  - ► The heart as "the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies."
  - ► "The heart... is the center of perception and understanding" and the "central and unifying organ" that "determines our personality." [74]
- The heart as a spiritual battleground.
- Kingdom consciousness.
  - ► Isaac the Syrian: The ladder to heaven is hidden inside you in your soul.
- A spiritual struggle.
  - ▶ John Carpathios: "It take great effort and struggle in prayer to reach that state of mind which is free from all [distractions] and disturbances." [75]
- Heightened awareness.
- Prayer and truth.
  - ► The prayer of the heart "unmasks the many illusions about ourselves and about God." [76]

► A.W. Tozer: "A new God-consciousness will seize upon us and we shall begin to...

- This truth leads us to rest in God.
  - ► Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" Matt. 5:8.

hear and inwardly feel God, who is our life and our all."	
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## **Practicum: Prayer and Ministry.**

- The sacred word.
- Short, simple prayers of the heart.
  - ▶ John Climacus: "When you pray do not try to express yourself in fancy words....

    Do not strive for verbosity lest your mind be distracted from devotion by a search for words.... Wordiness in prayer often subjects the mind to fantasy and dissipation; single words tend to concentrate the mind."
  - ► Abba Macarius: Oftentimes, the best prayer is, "Lord, help!" [80]
- The descent of the mind into the heart.
  - ► "A word or sentence repeated frequently can help us to concentrate, to move to the center, to create an inner stillness and thus to listen to the voice of God.... It can be like a ladder along which we can descend into the heart and ascend to God." [81]
- Sacred words (or thoughts).
- An "interior, unceasing doxology." [85]

#### Conclusion.

- "The prayer of the heart is the way to the purity of heart." [89]
- Contemplative-based ministry.
  - ► "This purity of heart allows us to see more clearly, not only our own needy, distorted, and anxious self but also the caring face of our compassionate God. When that vision remains clear and sharp, it will be possible to move into the midst of a tumultuous world with a heart at rest. It is this restful heart that will attract those who are groping to find their way through life. When we have found our rest in God we can do nothing other than minister. God's rest will be visible wherever we go and whoever we meet." [90]

# **Epilogue**

# Contemplative Spirituality and Salvation.

- The path to salvation discipleship and sanctification.
- Spiritual discipline and "working out our salvation" Phil. 2:12.
  - "Our compulsive, wordy, and mind-oriented world." [94]
  - ► "Solitude, silence, and prayer allow us to save ourselves and others from the shipwreck of our self-destructive society. The temptation is to go mad with those who are mad." [92]
- Spiritual transformation and the purification of our thoughts, words, and deeds.
- The story of the observant mystic.
  "It is enough to see you, Father." [94-95]
