

# The Way of the Heart

Henri J. M. Nouwen

(Ballantine Books, 1981)

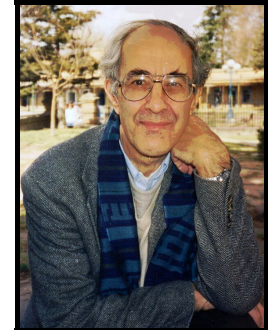
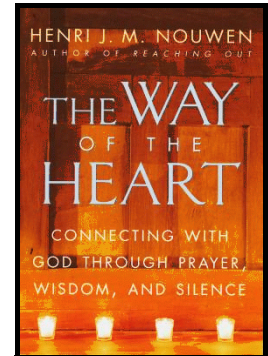
## Introduction

### 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.



## 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.”
- An antidote to pop Christianity.

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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.

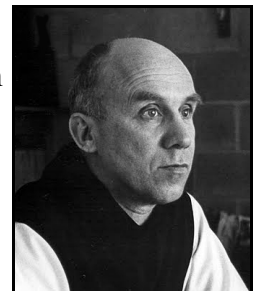
**1. Solitude**

**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]      Thomas Merton
- 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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**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]

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