About Henri Nouwen

The internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his Eucharistic celebrations, lectures and retreats. Since his death in 1996, ever-increasing numbers of readers, writers, teachers and seekers have been guided by his literary legacy. Nouwen’s books have sold over 2 million copies and been published in over 22 languages.

Born in Nijkerk, Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic. He went on to teach at the University of Notre Dame, and the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard. For several months during the 1970s, Nouwen lived and worked with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of the Genesee, and in the early 1980s he lived with the poor in Peru. In 1985 he was called to join L’Arche in Trosly, France, the first of over 100 communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants. A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L’Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada. He died suddenly on September 21st, 1996, in Holland and is buried in King City, Ontario, not far from the Daybreak Community.

Nouwen believed that what is most personal is most universal. He wrote, “By giving words to these intimate experiences I can make my life available to others.” His spirit lives on in the work of the Henri Nouwen Society, Henri Nouwen Stichting (Holland), the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, the Henri J. M. Nouwen Archives and Research Collection, and in all who live the spiritual values of communion, community and ministry, to which he dedicated his life.


1 Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel. Used with permission.

2 Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.
PEACEWORK
Prayer • Resistance • Community
by Henri J.M. Nouwen


Discussion questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Prepared by Claire S. Merritt
Recommended number of meetings for this book: 4

Although Henri Nouwen wrote this very personal book in the 1980’s at the height of the Cold War, it was not published until nearly a decade after his death in 1996. As a Christian, Henri considered himself called to be a peacemaker, for God is a God of peace and Jesus exhorted his disciples to be peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” A life of peace is based on three essential components: prayer, resistance and community. In the three parts of this book Henri considers each of these essentials and shows how they enable us to move from fear, hatred and isolation to a deeply spiritual, grateful and joyful response to the challenges posed by a world poised on the brink of disaster. Although more than twenty-five years have passed since these words were written they have lost none of their power for twenty-first century readers, who live in a time every bit as unstable as the Cold War.

Meeting #1 (Introduction, pp. 15-24) – Questions for Discussion:

1. Henri states: “The bombing of Hiroshima and the nuclear arms race that followed have made peacemaking the central task for Christians” (p. 15). Do you agree with Henri? Why or why not? To what extent does this remain an urgent task in the twenty-first century? Are there tasks that you consider to be equally or more important now?

2. Why is peace considered to be unrealistic by many people? Why do the United States and most other countries continue to spend huge sums of money on military preparedness?

3. What are Henri’s hesitations about stating unequivocally that he is for peace? What if any ambivalent feelings do you have about peace?

4. Describe antiwar activities in which you have participated. What opinions do you have of those who are active in the peace movement?

5. Henri is “asking for a conversion of our whole person so that all we do, say, and think becomes part of our urgent vocation to be peacemakers” (p. 23). What do you think might be involved in such a conversion?
Meeting #2 (Prayer, pp. 25-47) – Questions for Discussion:

In this first section of his book Henri explains why peacemaking must be grounded in prayer, for it is through prayer that we enter the house of the Lord, the Prince of Peace.

1. Henri states that “peace is a divine gift, a gift we receive in prayer” (p. 26). How do you understand this statement?

2. “Praying is living in the House of the Lord” (p. 26). Why is it essential that we choose to live in God’s house before we engage in peacemaking?

3. How do our needs get in the way of our best intentions? Share specific examples of needs that you try to fulfill through your actions.

4. What is the relationship between needs and wounds? Why is it so hard to heal our wounds and overcome what Henri calls “the pervasive tragedy of humanity” (p. 29)?

5. Why is it necessary to examine our own innermost motives when we try to be peacemakers?

6. What is “the true sinfulness of our humanity” (p. 31) according to Henri? How are we complicit in the world’s evil?

7. What does Henri mean by prayer? How is this concept of prayer different from piety?

8. “Fear is the most tempting force in peacemaking” (p. 35), according to Henri. Why is it counterproductive for peacemakers to use fear in order to advocate for peace?

9. “Only those who deeply know that they are loved and rejoice in that love can be true peacemakers” (p. 36). What is the importance of love in Henri’s view of peacemaking? How is it possible to attain this sense of love?

10. Henri says that “we can be in this world only when we no longer belong to it” (p. 37). How do you understand this paradox?

11. “Prayer is such a radical act because it asks us to criticize our whole way of being in the world, to lay down our old selves, and to accept our new self, which is Christ” (p. 41). Why is prayer as Henri understands it so difficult? How does this understanding correspond to your personal understanding of prayer?

12. In what sense does Henri see prayer as “the basis and source of all action” (p. 43)? What are the dangers of action without prayer?

13. What is the importance of attentive listening to God and what can we do to cultivate it?
14. Henri states that tranquility of the heart and a repentant heart are essential to peacemaking. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

Meeting #3 (Resistance, pp. 48-97) – Questions for Discussion:

In this section on resistance Henri makes an impassioned plea for peacemaking. Given the fact that a nuclear holocaust could put an end to all human life on earth, peacemaking has become “a holy obligation for all people whatever their profession or family situation” (p. 50). Resistance in the face of this peril means saying “No” to the forces of death and “Yes” to life.

SAYING “NO”

1. In the 1980’s Henri’s admiration for the ideals represented by the United States was being challenged by the increasing buildup of a nuclear arsenal and the preparation for a possible first strike. In your opinion, how do the dangers of that period compare with those we face now in the 21st century?

2. “Non-resistance makes us accomplices of a nuclear holocaust” (p. 53), according to Henri. What is your reaction to that statement in light of Jesus’ teachings?

3. Why is resistance in the nuclear age more urgent than in any other period of history?

4. Henri asks us “to unmask these death forces wherever and whenever they operate” (p. 55). What are some of the death forces you see at work in our culture?

5. What are your reactions to the portrayals of death by the entertainment industry? How innocent or harmful do you see this kind of entertainment?

6. What does Henri mean when he calls many of our judgments of others “a form of moral killing” (p. 60)? Why must we refrain from judging others in order to be peacemakers?

7. What does Henri mean by “spiritual suicide”? Why do you think it is so difficult to overcome our negative opinions of ourselves? Why must we do so in order to be peacemakers?

8. Why is it essential to say “no” to all manifestations of death, not just to nuclear death?

SAYING “YES”

1. What are the dangers of attacking the forces of death directly? How can the peacemaker avoid these dangers?

2. Why is it essential to love our enemies? Why do we fail to do this?

3. How does Henri define humility and what is its importance in peacemaking?

4. In what ways is a compassionate “yes” to life different from an issue-oriented attempt to solve problems?
5. Henri describes the joy he found among the poor and not among the privileged. How can we understand this joy? How does it differ from happiness?
6. Why must our resistance be “solid in faith” and not merely based on our human will and experience?

RESISTANCE AS PRAYER

1. How can resistance be seen as a form of prayer and liturgy? Why did it take Henri a long time to understand this? What, if any, difficulties do you have with this concept?
2. How can resistance that is firmly grounded in faith protect resisters from burnout and despair when they see no progress in the situation they are trying to change?

Notes
Meeting #4 (Community and Conclusion, pp. 98-127) – Questions for Discussion:

In this final section of his book Henri explains why prayer and resistance need to be rooted in community. Community not only supports and nurtures its member peacemakers but also keeps them from going off on arrogant acts of individual heroism instead of serving God. Also, community “is not just a means to accomplish peace; it is the place where the peace we are seeking receives its first form” (p. 99).

1. Henri says that “we have to discard all our tendencies to identify community with places, organizations, and denominations” (p. 102). What then makes a true Christian community?

2. How does living in community where repentance and forgiveness are central pillars transform the bad news of the violence that prevails throughout our world?

3. In this time when humanity risks total annihilation, where does Henri find a source of hope? Do you share his hope or do you see it as naïve? Describe anyone you know who exemplifies Henri’s vision.

4. How is gratitude possible in a world filled with suffering on the brink of destruction? What in fact are those who live in Christ grateful for?

5. The celebration of the Eucharist was central in Henri’s life. How can peacemaking be seen as a Eucharistic act?

CONCLUSION

Henri states: “The first and final criterion is whether we belong to God or to the world, whether we live in the house of peace or in the dwelling places of those who plot wars (p. 125). After reading this book, where do you see yourself? How has it changed your understanding of peacemaking? What steps can you take to move closer to “the house of peace”?

Notes
Nouwen Reading Groups  
**Feedback Form**

Thank you for your interest in Nouwen Reading Groups! We would be most appreciative if you could take a few minutes at the end of your last meeting to complete this feedback form and send to our office in the United States or Canada. We are eager to hear about your experience in the group and about the materials prepared by the Henri Nouwen Society. We continue to learn as we go along and with your help, we hope to improve and expand our offerings. Blessings!

1. Why did you decide to start/join a Nouwen reading group? (check as many as are appropriate for you)

- [ ] Enjoy discussing books
- [ ] Interested in discussions of a spiritual nature
- [ ] Enjoy getting together with friends for any reason
- [ ] Want to meet new people who are interested in spirituality
- [ ] Nouwen’s writing resonates with me
- [ ] Did not know Nouwen’s work but was interested
- [ ] Other: __________________________

2. How did you invite people to join your reading group/learn about the reading group?

- [ ] Spoke with friends/co-workers
- [ ] Notice in church bulletin/newsletter
- [ ] Announcement to congregation
- [ ] MeetUp.com
- [ ] Email
- [ ] Other: ______________________________________________________________________

3. What book did you reflect on? _________________________________________________

4. Why were you interested in discussing this particular book?

   _______________________________________________________________________________

5. How would you evaluate the Henri Nouwen Society reflection guide? (please circle appropriate number)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not helpful</th>
<th>Extremely helpful</th>
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<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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6. How was the reflection guide used?
7. Was the Nouwen Reading Group a positive experience for you? □ Yes □ No

Why? __________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

8. Would you consider leading or joining another Nouwen Reading Group in the future?
□ Yes □ No □ Maybe

Additional comments welcome:___________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Thank you!

Additional questions for group leader:

9. Where did your group meet? □ Your home □ Church hall □ Library □ School
□ Other:________________________City:________________________State/Province:________

10. How often did your group meet? □ Once a week □ Bi-weekly □ Monthly
□ Other:________________________ Duration of meeting:___________hours

11. Your group met from (month)______ (year)______ to (month)______ (year)______

12. How many people were in the group at the beginning?________ At the end?________

13. What occurred during your first meeting?
□ Prayer □ Fellowship □ Invited others to take on some leadership roles (ex. introduction to a chapter; organize refreshments, prayer, etc.) □ Viewed “Journey of the Heart: the life of Henri Nouwen” film □ Discussion based on reflection guide
□ Other:_____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:
In Canada — 113 St. Joseph St., Toronto, ON M5S 1J4
In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122