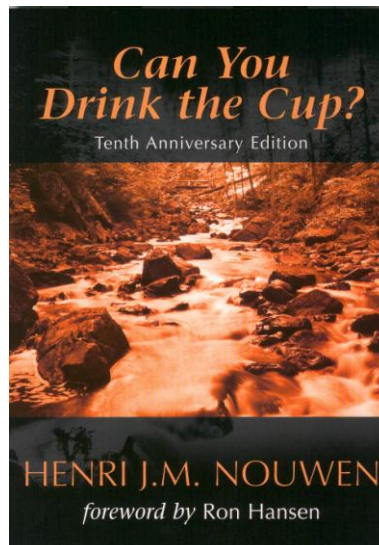


Can You Drink the Cup?

By **Henri J.M. Nouwen**

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups
Four Week Program



© 2012 Henri Nouwen Society

Can You Drink the Cup?

by **Henri J. M. Nouwen**

© 1996, 2006¹ Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, Inc., (softcover)

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Prepared by Claire S. Merritt

Recommended number of meetings for this book: 4

Meeting # 1: (pp. 13-21 or 16-25)

Prologue: *The Chalice and the Cup*

Introduction: *The Question*

Henri Nouwen begins this deeply personal book with the story of his early vocation to the priesthood and his ordination in 1957, at which time his uncle, a priest, gave to Henri the gold chalice that he had used for many years. In his later years, while living and working at the L'Arche Daybreak Community², Henri reflects on Jesus' question to James and John: "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" The cup becomes a metaphor for life, and the question for all of us becomes "Can we hold the cup of life in our hands? Can we lift it up for others to see and can we drink it to the full?" (pp. 20-21 or 24).

Discussion questions – Week 1:

1. Henri's early vocation to become a priest was enthusiastically supported by his grandmother. What did you want to become when you were a child? How was your dream encouraged or discouraged? Did you pursue an early vocation or did your interests change as you got older?
2. Instead of the gold chalice he received from his uncle, Henri used a glass cup when celebrating the Eucharist at L'Arche Daybreak. What symbolic differences do you see between a chalice and a cup?
3. In what ways does the metaphor of "the cup of life" resonate for you?

Notes

¹ The 1996 edition includes 12 black & white illustrations by Jane Pitz. The 10th anniversary edition (2006) includes 3 of the illustrations and a foreword by Ron Hansen.

² L'Arche is an international federation of over 100 communities where people with developmental disabilities and those who care for them live, work and share life together. Canadian Jean Vanier founded L'Arche in France in 1964.

Meeting # 2 – Part 1 – Holding the Cup (pp. 25-51 or 28-56)

By means of the metaphor of holding a cup of wine Henri examines the importance of looking at one's life, of reflecting upon all it contains, both sorrow and joy.

Discussion questions – Week 2:

Chapter 1 – *Holding*

1. Henri states that “just living life is not enough. We must know what we are living” (p. 26 or 29). Do you make it a practice to evaluate your life and, if so, what have you discovered?
2. Why, according to Henri, is it useless to “compare our lives with those of others?” (p. 28 or 31). What challenges do you face when you accept your life as unique?

Chapter 2 – *The Cup of Sorrow*

1. Have you ever lived or worked with people who were marginalized in some way? How did you respond to them?
2. Our world is filled with sorrow and pain. How do you respond to universal suffering?
3. What can Jesus' suffering teach us about facing our own sorrows?

Chapter 3 – *The Cup of Joy*

1. Henri describes the joy he has found at L'Arche Daybreak. Have you ever experienced joy in the midst of sorrow and tragedy? What did your joy consist of?
2. While describing Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane Henri says: “When we are crushed like grapes, we cannot think of the wine we will become” (p. 49 or 54). In what ways have you been transformed by suffering?
3. If the experience of sorrow is often a prerequisite to finding joy, does this mean that we shouldn't try to alleviate people's suffering? How do you think we should relate to those who suffer?

Notes

Meeting # 3 – Part 2 – *Lifting the Cup* (pp. 55-75 or 60-81)

Henri uses the image of lifting the cup to explore the importance of living our lives in community.

Chapter 4 – *Lifting*

1. Henri recalls the ritual of drinking wine in his childhood home. Does your family have special rituals for certain occasions? Describe them. What do they mean to you?
2. Henri compares community to a mosaic in which every small piece, no matter how seemingly insignificant by itself, has an essential role to play. Think of someone in your family or church community and describe how he or she is an important part of the whole.
3. Do you find it easy or difficult to live your life in community? Which communities are the most important to you? Why?

Chapter 5 – *The Cup of Blessings*

1. Henri uses the story of Trevor and his toast to illustrate how the cup of sorrow and joy can become the cup of blessings. Can you recall a similar experience in your life where an initially tense situation was changed into celebration because of what someone did to break the ice?
2. In what sense is the cup of the Eucharist a cup of blessings? How does it differ from the cup of God's wrath?
3. "The Eucharist is that sacred mystery through which what we lived as a curse, we now live as a blessing" (p. 68 or 75). How do you interpret this statement?

Chapter 6 – *To Life*

1. Which occasions do you celebrate in your family and what do these celebrations mean to you?
2. Henri devotes most of this chapter to recounting the celebration of Bill's *Life Story Book*. In what ways have you celebrated the lives of persons who have been important to you?
3. Henri states: "But when we lift our cup to life, we must dare to say: 'I am grateful for *all* that has happened to me and led me to this moment'" (p. 75 or 80). Why is it important to be grateful for everything that has happened in our lives, both the good and the bad?

Meeting # 4 – Part 3 –

Drinking the Cup (pp. 79-101 or 84-112)
Conclusion – The Answer (pp. 102-107 or 114-119)
Epilogue – One Cup, One Body (pp. 109-111 or 120-123)

Drinking the cup is the symbol for living life fully and claiming it as one's own. By means of stories from his own life, especially his experiences at L'Arche Daybreak, Henri explains the meanings of this symbol.

Chapter 7 – *Drinking*

1. Henri says that “having a drink together is a sign of friendship, intimacy, and peace” (p. 80 or 85). Think of times in your life when this has been true for you.
2. “Drinking the cup of life is fully appropriating and internalizing our own unique existence, with all its sorrows and joys” (p. 81 or 86-87). Why is this often very difficult to do?
3. In what sense is drinking the cup of life more than just “making the best of it”?
4. What is spiritual greatness according to Henri? Do you agree?

Chapter 8 – *The Cup of Salvation*

1. Henri quotes Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, who explained to the Daybreak members that they were sending those who were leaving them on a mission to bring to others some of the love they had shared. How can this explanation help ease the pain of parting with those we love?
2. What enabled Jesus, and enables us, to transform the cup of the joy and sorrow of our lives into a cup of salvation?
3. What are some of the addictions and compulsions that entrap us? What do they all have in common? How can we overcome them?
4. Henri says: “Salvation is not only a goal for the afterlife. Salvation is a reality of every day that we can taste here and now” (p. 91 or 100). Give examples from your own life when you have tasted this cup of salvation.

Chapter 9 – *To the Bottom*

1. Do you avoid silence or do you actively seek it? Where in our noisy world can we find it? How does it help us “drink our cup”?
2. Henri states: “We cannot live a spiritual life in secrecy” (p. 96 or 106). Do you find it easy or difficult to share the contents of your cup with others? Why is it important to have trusted friends to whom we can reveal our true selves?
3. How does action differ from busyness, vocation from wanting?
4. What do you find difficult in the disciplines of silence, word and action?

Conclusion – *The Answer*

1. The disciples John and James did not know what they were saying yes to when they said that they could drink the cup that Jesus offered them. What in your life have you said yes to that turned out to be very different from what you expected?
2. How have Jesus and the Holy Spirit enabled you to drink the cup of your life?

Epilogue – *One Cup, One Body*

1. Henri concentrates on the celebration of the Eucharist in order to reflect on two things: (1) his forty years as a priest and (2) the unifying power of the sacrament by means of which “we are transformed into the one body of the living Christ, always dying and always rising for the salvation of the world” (p.111 or 123). What meaning does the Eucharist have for you?

Notes



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 solitude, community and ministry, to which he dedicated his life.

For more information about Henri Nouwen, his writing and the work of the Henri Nouwen Society visit: www.HenriNouwen.org.

³ Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel

⁴ Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.

Other comments about the reflection guide: _____

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" video Discussion based on reflection guide

Other: _____

Additional comments welcome: _____

Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:

In Canada — 113 St. Joseph St. 3rd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1J4

In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122-0522