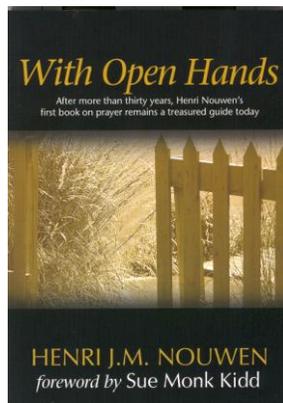


With Open Hands

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Five Week Program



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

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

² Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.

With Open Hands
by Henri J.M. Nouwen

© 1972, revised in 1994 and 2005. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.

Discussion Questions for Reading Groups
Prepared by Ed Wojcicki

About this book

This is a book to be sipped in small doses. It is about prayer, reflection, silence, hope and a longtime spiritual journey. Take your time with it. Look at the pictures as well as the words. It will be worth your time to let it sink in slowly. As Henri says elsewhere, in day-to-day prayer you may not feel as if anything about your life is changing, but six months later, if you stay with it, you may find that something significant has changed. The 1994 revised version of *With Open Hands* has an updated design and different photos than the 1972 version. Henri found that the book's message was as powerful in the 1990s as it was in the 1970s. The latest edition, released in 2005, includes a foreword by Sue Monk Kidd.

To develop the ideas in this book, Henri credits 25 students whom he gathered for seven meetings to discuss what is truly involved in prayer.

Recommended number of meetings for small-group discussion of *With Open Hands*: **5**

Notes

Meeting #1 (pp. 13-27)

Preface and INTRODUCTION

Themes:

We often hold fast to what is familiar, even if we aren't all that proud of it. Many of us hold onto grudges, anger, bitterness, and we get along OK "until the moment when you want to pray" (page 22). And when we try to pray, the resistance to opening ourselves up returns. Praying is a long spiritual journey of trust – a process that requires detachment from what we consider repulsive.

Discussion questions:

1. Do you think Henri is right that many of us hold onto anger, a bad habit, something we are not proud of, even though we believe we would like to change? "You feel it safe to cling to a sorry past than to trust in a new future" (page 21). Identify a specific example.
2. Have you ever discovered, as Henri did, "the mysterious truth that something universal [in all people] can be found in the most intimate center of our hearts"? (page 15)

Notes

Meeting #2 (pp. 29-45)

CHAPTER ONE: Prayer and Silence

Themes:

Being around noise all the time is now normal. Silence can be threatening. Silence is full of sounds that we do not hear. An “inner silence” is difficult to achieve. But the silence inside of us can give us new confidence and allow us to see our lives and our world differently, in a much more gentle way. “It is this silence which is the silence of peace and prayer because it brings you back to the One who is leading you” (page 43).

Discussion questions:

1. When you're by yourself at home, how quickly do you turn on a radio, TV or music, or pick up something to read?
2. For you, is silence more *frightening* or more *peaceful*? (see page 33)
3. As you read the chapter, did you take the time to pause and enjoy one or more of the pictures? Which one? If you didn't do that, did you learn something in this question about what it means to pause to enjoy the silence?
4. When do you make time for silence? What do you feel during such moments?
5. Do you ever find yourself, while praying in silence, leaping ahead in your mind to the next thing that you will do, or wanting to stop praying and “do” something more actively? How do you respond to that internally?

Notes

Meeting #3 (pp. 47-79)

CHAPTERS 2 and 3: “Prayer and Acceptance” and “Prayer and Hope”

Themes:

These two chapters differentiate between what we want – or what we believe we want – and what we might discover in prayer about ourselves, God and the world. This is difficult. Real prayer is not dependent upon what we want, but upon trust that God will fulfill the deepest desires of our hearts. Our prayer might always be plentiful with requests and desires, and there is nothing wrong with that, “but ultimately it is not a question of having a wish come true, but of expressing an unlimited faith in the giver of all good things” (page 73).

Discussion questions:

1. Identify an unfulfilled desire or dream in your life. How can you maintain confidence in God when God might seem unconcerned about that aspect of your life?
2. How do you respond to Henri’s observation that Jesus led his followers to the cross? (page 60) Is it possible in prayer to be open to being led to the cross, or do you believe it is possible to pursue success, achievement and productivity and avoid a big cross all at the same time?
3. How frightening is it, in the midst of our very busy way of life, to pray with true dependence on God: “Even when it seems that things are not going my way, I know that they are going [God’s] way and that in the end, your way is the best way for me”? (page 78)

Notes

Meeting #4 (pp. 81-97)

CHAPTER 4: Prayer and Compassion

Themes: When you say, “I’ll pray for you,” is it a sign of genuine concern for others? The crucial question is not whether and how to pray. “The crucial question is whether we should pray always and whether our prayer is necessary” (page 84). In prayer, conversion occurs, a recognition that I am human and only God is God. Thus, prayer is liberating and moves us toward compassion for others. Compassion born of prayer is also born “of your meeting with God who is also the God of all people” (page 94). It can be hurtful and disappointing when others are not open to our genuine compassion, but the trust in God generated by prayer “makes you free to live a compassionate life even when it does not evoke a grateful response or bring immediate rewards” (page 96).

Discussion questions:

1. Do you really see the link between our prayer and God and then between our prayer and other people? How have you seen this in your own life?
2. Isn’t it difficult to accept that our God is also the God of people we don’t like, consider adversaries, or have lifestyles or attitudes repulsive to our own values?
3. What does it mean to say that the God to whom I pray is also the God of everybody else? What implications does this have on my own thinking and attitude toward others?

Notes

Meeting #5 (pp. 99-125)

CHAPTER 5: Prayer and Prophetic Criticism and CONCLUSION: With Open Hands

Themes:

[*First an editorial note:* Parts of Chapter 5 might feel disturbing, while other parts might tap into a peace that you can feel at a deep level but barely express.] Many people feel a deep longing for a different kind of world. It is important for Christians to pose critical questions of the status quo. An inner vision guides modern-day “prophets,” who are obedient to that vision. But these prophets don’t organize groups around themselves. They know they may not see their inner vision achieved, yet they seem to have a concrete goal in mind. Some people are attracted to such prophetic voices, but many others are repulsed – leading to ostracization of the prophets. Many people who see themselves as defenders of the truth actually reject and shun true prophetic voices. “Prayer means ... allowing yourself to be led by the vision that has become real to you” (page 114). Prayer means calling the world to a deeper conversion. Ultimately, praying means living; praying means praying in everything that we do, “and we open our hands to be led by God even to places we would rather not go” (page 124).

Discussion questions:

CHAPTER 5: “Prayer and Prophetic Criticism” and CONCLUSION: “With Open Hands”

Discussion questions:

1. In what ways do we need a different kind of world? Specifically, what is there about *your own community* that seems at odds with the prophetic voice within you? How do you respond?
2. How is it possible to maintain a trust in God, through prayer, when bad things you see don’t seem to change, or change very little?
3. Does it seem possible for you to be praying in *everything* that you do? Why or why not?
4. This book is full of inspiring pictures. Bring a picture of your own – one from your own scrapbook or boxes of photos – that speaks to the issues raised in this chapter. Share the picture. In what ways does this picture stir your soul in ways that words may not describe well enough?

Nouwen Reading Group

Book: _____

Group Members:

| Name | Phone Number | E-mail |
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Leadership tasks that could be shared within your group:

| Date of meeting | Prayer/song and check-in with each other | DVD segments: <i>Journey of the Heart</i> | Reader: themes, questions, text passages | Discussion leader | Refreshments |
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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” film Discussion based on reflection guide

Other: _____

Additional comments welcome: _____

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

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