

HENRI J.M.
NOUWEN

Community

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Introduction

Henri Nouwen wrote and spoke often about community during his life and ministry as a pastor, priest, and a professor. His search for community propelled his writing and many of his life's most significant choices, including his decision to leave his academic teaching position at Harvard in 1986 to join a L'Arche community, Daybreak, in Richmond Hill, Ontario. It was as part of the Daybreak community that Henri lived the last ten years of his life alongside those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their assistants. Drawing on published and previously unpublished material, this book provides a picture of why Henri thought community was such a necessary and integral part of the spiritual life in all its many dimensions.

For Henri, community is a basic need and hunger of the human heart. We are created for community, but often we do not experience it in the individualistic and competitive cultures that shape our lives. Community is a place marked by acceptance, intimacy, and vulnerability, where we can bear fruit in solidarity with others and be the body of Christ for the sake of the world. It is a place of care and celebration, the place where our wounds and weaknesses are exposed, a sheltered place for the confession of sin and brokenness, and a house of love where we can receive forgiveness and offer it in return.

Community for Henri was also a difficult and lifelong quest.

It was a quest for belonging with others and for belonging to God that in his writing and speaking he called communion. Community includes the great gifts he discovered as a beloved member of Daybreak, an intentional Christian community, and at the Abbey of the Genesee, a Trappist monastery where he made extended stays and sought spiritual guidance. It also can be found in the ordinary (and sometimes extraordinary) experiences of life together with others in friendships and in families, in worshipping congregations, and in small groups where people come together with a common purpose. For Henri, it is in community in its many different forms where we can rediscover and claim our shared humanity and our vulnerability to be empowered to live more compassionately. Encouraged by others and the example of Jesus, we can practice together what Henri called “the downward way of Christ” that does not run away from human suffering but responds with love and care. We are able to do that because we have discovered and claimed our own belovedness in God that extends outward to all without exception or condition.

Among his thirty-nine published books, translated into many languages, Henri authored eight books between 1969 and 1986 that include substantial chapters on community.¹ Most of his other books also explore dimensions of this theme implicitly or explicitly, incorporating insights about community, such as those that can be found in his well-known daily devotional *Bread for the Journey*, or his book *Can You Drink the Cup?*, both completed in 1996, the last year of his life. In *Can You Drink*

¹These include *Intimacy* (1969); *Out of Solitude* (1974); *Reaching Out* (1975); *Clowning in Rome* (1979); *Making All Things New* (1981); *Compassion* (1982); *Peacework* (authored 1982–1984); and *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* (published 1987).

the Cup?, Henri writes: “Community is a fellowship of people who do not hide their joys or sorrows but make them visible to each other in a gesture of hope. . . . Community is like a large mosaic . . . a fellowship of little people who together make God visible to the world.”²

Beyond these published books, Henri spoke frequently about community in lectures and on retreats across North America and Europe. He also contributed many short articles on the topic to various publications from the 1970s until the time of his death in 1996. He died from a sudden heart attack in his home country of the Netherlands while en route to make a film in Saint Petersburg, Russia, about his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. This book gathers together some of those lesser-known articles and presentations, including five appearing in print here for the first time. Looking back at his writing and speaking on community over more than two decades, this book marks the 25th anniversary of his death, and the ongoing relevance of his insights for a world in need of the kind of community he described.

The chapters are organized chronologically from the 1970s to the 1990s, with the exception of the first chapter, which is a presentation Henri delivered on solitude, community, and ministry in 1993. It is followed by an article on spiritual formation and community in theological education that Henri published in 1977 during his ten years as a professor of pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School. In that article he explores the communal context of Christian spirituality and theological education, in addition to the role of spiritual practices such as *lectio divina*, prayer, silence, and spiritual direction. Chapter 3 explores the

²*Can You Drink the Cup?* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1996), 57–58.

integral link between community and solitude for communities at risk of burnout, observing how time alone and apart makes community members stronger when they are together. Solitude, he explains, is also much more than simply a means to some positive end. “Without solitude,” he writes, “a prophetic community loses its pastoral dimension and soon extinguishes its own light.”

Chapter 4 explores how living in community requires a radical change of heart and mind for most people today. Community requires “living with the mind of Christ,” Henri writes, and it “starts becoming visible as soon as we perceive ourselves as fellow travelers, as people on the same road.” In chapter 5 (originally a sermon Henri gave to mark the United Nations General Assembly’s Second Special Session on Disarmament in 1982) Henri discusses the role of community and prayer in peacemaking. “Community provides the space where through prayer and a careful diagnosis of the problems of our day, we feel called to speak up and act together,” he preaches.

In chapter 6, Henri explores the interactions between the broken self, the broken world, and community in an address to the Catholic Youth Corps given in 1987 less than a year after he accepted the call to join the community of L’Arche Daybreak. Chapter 7 recounts the story of Henri’s visit to another L’Arche community, one in Central America in the 1980s. Here he explores what communities like the one he visited in Suyapa, Honduras, have to teach Christians in North America about community, systemic injustice, and faithfulness to Jesus and the Kingdom of God. In chapter 8, as part of a previously unpublished lecture from 1991, Henri recounts how his move from the competitive academic atmosphere of Harvard to Daybreak deepened his own understanding and practice of community,

though not without considerable pain and struggle, even as he found the home he had been seeking for many years. We see the consistency of his insights over time, as well as their maturing through a more lived-out experience of community.

In chapter 9, Henri offers a spirituality for community that incorporates lessons learned from his pastoring, caregiving, and care-receiving at L'Arche. Not one ever to paper over the genuine stress and struggle of community, Henri notes humorously: "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives." The concluding chapter offers an extended retreat presentation Henri gave to assistants at a L'Arche community in the final year of his life. He spoke on the need for conversion and transformation in community life, offering counsel and spiritual practices to keep community life focused on the compassionate and life-giving way of Jesus.

Community, for Henri, was never first of all an abstract or academic or optional idea. Life together and the bonds of connection and belonging that we depend on daily are as immediate and necessary for life as one's next breath. That fact has become powerfully apparent as the entire world continues to deal with the disruptive and devastating impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The development of this book to mark the 25th anniversary of Henri's death coincided with the outbreak of a contagious and deadly disease that has closed churches and workplaces, separated children from grandparents, ended normal gatherings, and altered the experience of community that many took for granted before February 2020. Long remembered will be the imposed isolation from one another, the loneliness, the mandated lockdowns for the sake of public health, and the tragic loss of life. Into this experience of a radical absence of life together that many experience today, Henri's words and insights

about community, and our human need for it, take on a great urgency that only adds to their deep and abiding wisdom.

Stephen Lazarus
The Sunday before Ash Wednesday
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