

# In the Name of Jesus

Title: *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*

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## Book Summary:

Henri Nouwen presents a powerful vision of leadership for now and for the future in this treasure of a book. By looking back at his own life and transition from the academic setting of Harvard to working with the mentally handicapped at the L'Arche communities in Toronto, Henri Nouwen reflects upon the challenges and the solutions to the problems within today's Christian leadership. Realizing how much his own thinking was influenced by the desire to be relevant, the desire to be popular, and the desire to be powerful. Nouwen asks that today's leader look to God to overcome these temptations. He also challenges many of the current perceptions of how to lead and takes the reader back to the lessons of Scripture and the lived example of Jesus.

This book will challenge anyone in a leadership position to reflect upon his or her role and, if taken seriously, become a source of inspiration and renewal.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, author of *Reaching Out*, *Wounded Healer*, *Lifesigns* and many other works, has taught at the University of Notre Dame, Yale, Harvard, and for the past two years he has shared his life as a priest with mentally handicapped people.

## Book Notes:

God is a God of the present and reveals to those who are willing to listen carefully to the moment in which they live the steps they are to take toward the future. (3)

After twenty five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues. Everyone was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger. (10)

### 1. The Temptation: To Be Relevant (15)

I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life. (17)

While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world. (21)

It is here that the need for a new Christian leadership becomes clear. The leader of the future will be the one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there. (22)

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope. The Christian leader of the future is one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, “a heart of flesh,” in Jesus. (24- 25)

The radical good news is that the second love is only a broken reflection of the first love and that the first love is offered to us by a God in whom there are no shadows. Jesus’ heart is the incarnation of the shadow-free first love of God. (26)

The knowledge of Jesus’ heart is a knowledge of the heart. And when we live in the world with that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life and hope wherever we go. (27)

#### The Discipline: Contemplative Prayer

To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God’s first love, we have to be mystics. A mystic is a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God’s first love. (28)

Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own and God’s heart. (28)

Contemplative prayer deepens in us the knowledge that we are already free, that we have already found a place to dwell, that we already belong to God, even though everything and everyone around us keeps suggesting the opposite. (29)

But for the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately. (30)

Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them. (31)

But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative. For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required. (31- 32)

#### 2. The Temptation: To Be Spectacular (38)

The second temptation to which Jesus was exposed was precisely the temptation to do something spectacular, something that could win him great applause. (38)

I need my brothers or sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart and body. But far more importantly, it is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I. This is very clearly made visible when we proclaim the redeeming power of God together. Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us. (41)

He wants Peter to feed his sheep and care for them, not as “professionals” who know their clients’ problems and take care of them, but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved. (43)

Laying down your life means making your own faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear available to others as ways of getting in touch with the Lord of life. (43)

We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God. (43- 44)

When the members of a community of faith cannot truly know and love their shepherd, shepherding quickly becomes a subtle way of exercising power over others and begins to show authoritarian and dictatorial traits. (44)

From this it is clear that a whole new type of leadership is asked for in the Church of tomorrow, a leadership which is not modeled on the power games of the world, but on the servant- leader, Jesus, who came to give his life for the salvation of many. (45)

Just as the future leaders must be mystics deeply steeped in contemplative prayer, so also must they be persons always willing to confess their own brokenness and ask for forgiveness from those to whom they minister. (45- 46)

They separate themselves from their own concrete community, try to deal with their needs by ignoring them or satisfying them in distant or anonymous places, and then experience an increasing split between their own most private inner world and the good news they announce. (48)

Christian leaders are called to live the Incarnation, that is, to live in the body- not only in their own bodies but also in the corporate body of the community, and to discover there the presence of the Holy Spirit. (48)

I am convinced that priests and ministers, especially those who relate to many anguishing people, need a truly safe place for themselves. They need a place where they can share their deep pain and struggles with people who do not need them, but who can guide them ever deeper into the mystery of God’s love. (50)

### 3. The Temptation: To Be Powerful (55)

The temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest of all. (58)

It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. (59)

The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. (60)

Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate

relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love. (60)

But Jesus has a different vision of maturity: It is the ability and willingness to be led where you would rather not go. (62)

It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest. (63)

Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who have no spine and who let everyone else make decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly. (63- 64)

If there is any hope for the Church in the future, it will be hope for a poor Church in which its leaders are willing to be led. (64)

Just as prayer keeps us connected with the first love and just as confession and forgiveness keep our ministry communal and mutual, so strenuous theological reflection will allow us to discern critically where we are being led. (65)

Christian leaders have the arduous task of responding to personal struggles, family conflicts, national calamities, and international tensions with an articulate faith in God's real presence. (67)

He asks us to move from a concern for relevance to a life of prayer, from worries about popularity to communal and mutual ministry, and from leadership built on power to a leadership in which we critically discern where God is leading us and our people. (72)

I leave you with the image of the leader with outstretched hands, who chooses a life of downward mobility. It is the image of the praying leader, the vulnerable leader, and the trusting leader. (73)