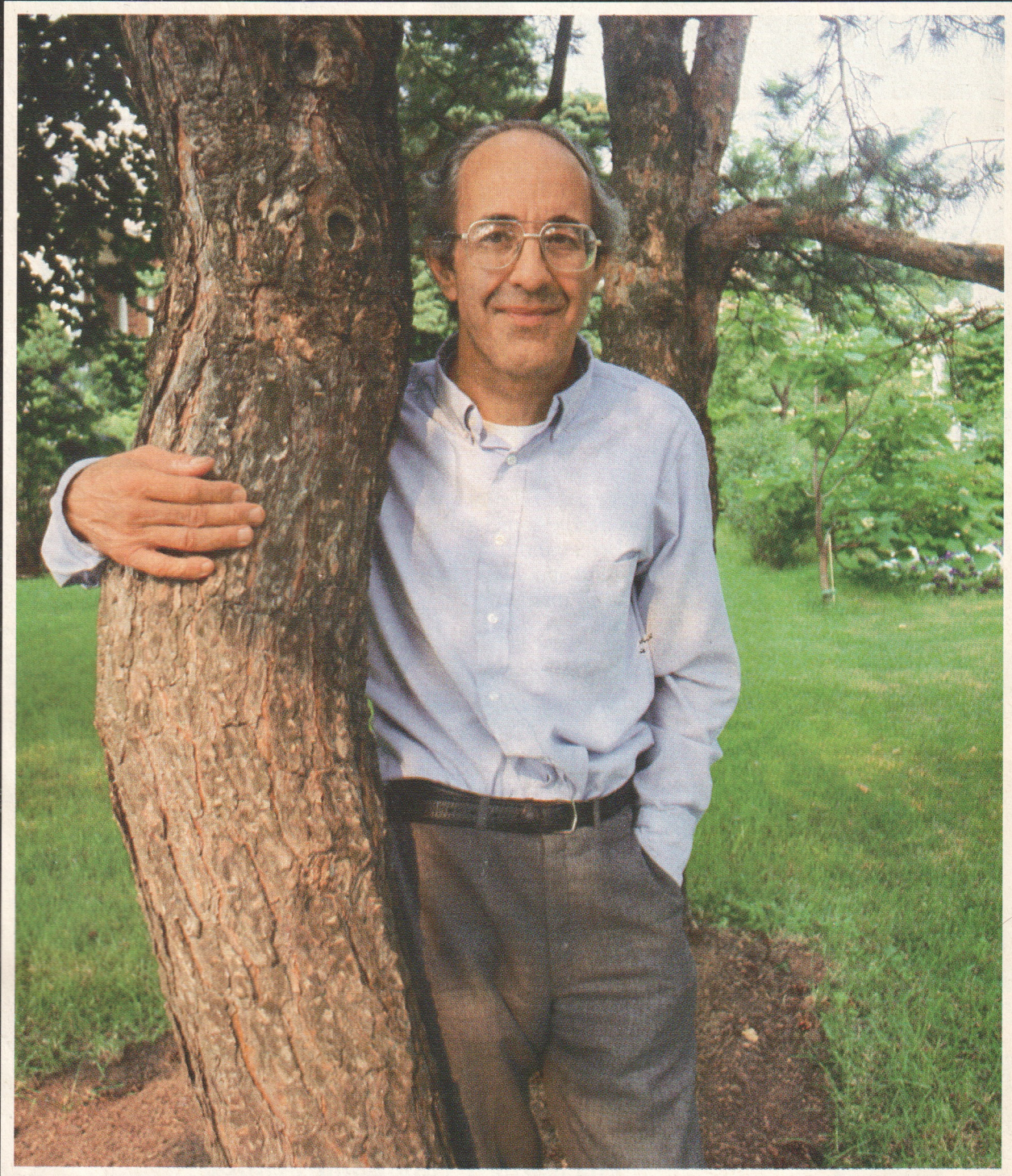


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HENRI NOUWEN

A Conversation Between Friends

RACIST EDUCATION Testing Takes Its Toll
POWs Should Nonviolent Christians Care?

Henri Nouwen

Henri speaks of obedience, prayer, and finding home at last at l'Arche

I arrived an unprofessional thirty minutes early for my interview with Henri Nouwen. It was 8:00 A.M., and he was in prayer with a l'Arche assistant. But he interrupted that to welcome me and quickly offered a cup of coffee. "That's probably what you need most right now." I asked if I could join them in prayer. "Of course, I didn't know what you were comfortable with, whether you are a man of prayer." Our silent time in the chapel was a sign of things to come: the day would be more of a retreat than a journalistic encounter.

All day, Nouwen was friendly and hospitable, always trying to put me at ease and making sure I had enough to eat. His gracious hospitality reminded me of my Dutch mother. That fit his thick and reassuring Dutch accent (where *themes* are *seams* and *Jerusalem* is *Yerusalem*)—except that in my Dutch upbringing, men usually aren't hosts. Nouwen is a tall, lanky man in his late fifties. He smiles easily, and his gaze feels as if it penetrates deeply into one's own being. His graying, dark hair is uncooperative, with one errant lock perpetually trying to sneak toward his forehead.

My understanding was that we only had two and a half hours to talk, but Nouwen wanted me to stay longer. "It's nice to have time together when people are not in a hurry. I hate quick telephone interviews. I might like to take you to some of the community houses and then you have a sense of who is who. If you write, it's important that you get the right tone because l'Arche has its own tone." I gladly complied.

Daybreak is large. Comprised of ten houses, it was the first l'Arche community in North America. l'Arche is an international network of communities where mentally handicapped persons and their assistants attempt to live together according to the gospel. It was founded by Jean Vanier and the priest Thomas Philippe. Although ecumenical, it is strongly nourished by Roman Catholic spirituality.

Nouwen and I met in the building

where he lives. Originally, it was built to house the large family of Daybreak's founders. Now, with a library and chapel, it is a prayer center for the community. It is presently being converted to be wheelchair accessible. As a result, the yard is in an uproar, torn up and muddy. I was thankful Nouwen warned me to not wear good shoes.

As I prepared for our discussion, I was struck by the irony of my going to speak with such an eloquent advocate of silence. Nouwen writes, "Silence is the mystery of the future world. It keeps us pilgrims and prevents us from being entangled in the cares of this age. It guards the fire of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. It allows us to speak a word that participates in the creative and recreative power of God's own Word."

I wondered whether I would need to prod him to be forthcoming, and I had no idea how I would do that. But my fears were in vain. Nouwen is a talker. He speaks at length, piling on observations and reflections without end. Several times, he made sheepish apologies for his verbosity. "Sorry I talk so long." I didn't mind; it made my job easier, and he was well worth listening to. I reassured him that I didn't consider him a *praatjesmaker* (a Dutch word meaning a fabricator of idle chatter.)

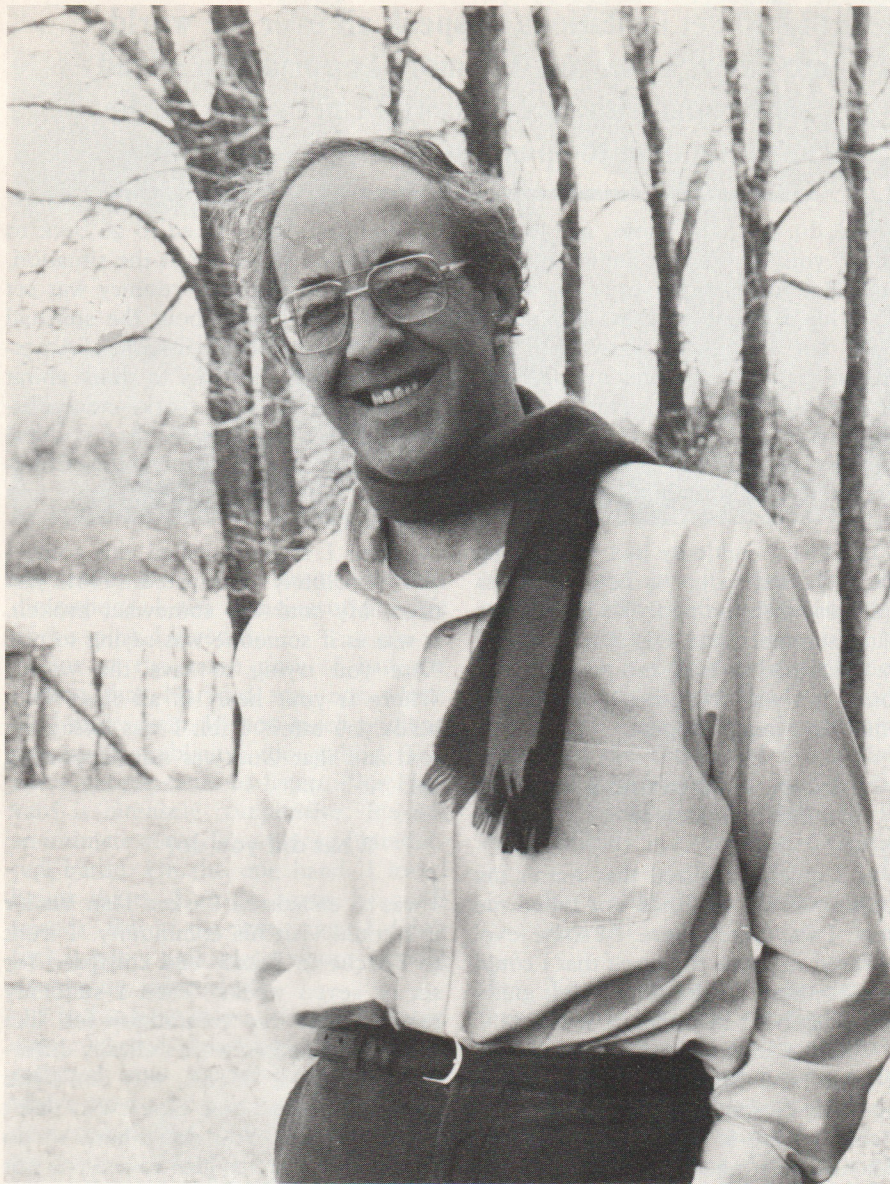
Our discussion centered around the spiritual journey that brought Nouwen to l'Arche. The day before I met him, I heard that the Vatican had ordered Matthew Fox to a year of public silence. When I wondered if he had any comments, he said simply, "No, I don't want to talk about those things." Then I asked him more generally about crea-

tion spirituality, since Nouwen and Matthew Fox are both widely read spiritual authors. But all he said was, "I hate to talk about these things. Let's talk about community, about me. I can make big statements about these other issues, but it takes me hours to say it well. Yet it's not going to help you. I'm quite willing to do it, but my mind is just not there at all." When I raised other issues for comment, he showed the same reticence.

At first I didn't understand, but Nouwen is quite specific in his focus. He writes, "Prayer is the center of the Christian life. It is the only necessary thing (Luke 10:42)." Nouwen insists that we get our priorities straight. Grounding ourselves in God's love is a necessary prerequisite before responding to issues and getting involved in causes. "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. Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness."

I was surprised at how frank Nouwen was with me in his sharing. "I say things that I think you know. If you had been a *New York Times* interviewer, I would probably not have mentioned a third of what I said to you. I make myself more vulnerable because you seem to be a vulnerable person." Indeed, in my own life I had recently been convinced about my own need to be deepened in prayer; so I did feel I understood what Nouwen was saying. His words deepened my own convictions. As a result of his counsel and sharing, I resolved to be more intentional in my own spiritual development.

In fact, Nouwen transcended the interview and turned it into a conversation between friends. He asked me many questions about my life, work, and spirituality. An intuitive man, he probed to the heart of my spiritual needs. "You have a tender heart and so your work—



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children, church, counseling—is overwhelming at times. But it also means that God is calling you to a deep spiritual life. You obviously have to be a mystic, living in communion with God. By mystic I don’t mean anything more than God is the one who loves you deeply. And that’s what you have to trust. And keep trusting, trusting, trusting.”

I didn’t realize how closely Nouwen was paying attention to me. At one point in our conversation, I must have started looking sad, as if it was all too much to take in. He leapt up saying, “Let me give you a hug!” and he pulled me into a warm, reassuring embrace.

That afternoon, Nouwen celebrated the Eucharist and a dozen people from the community participated. While reverent, it was friendly and informal too. Nouwen’s robe and stole and the solemnity of the ritual communicated the profundity of the service. Yet its re-

laxed feel made everyone comfortable.

The service made several false starts, re-beginning as others kept trickling in. One late arrival was a little girl who had just come from a pottery class. She offered her latest creation, a small bowl, as a gift to Nouwen. He interrupted the service to examine and praise it, wondering aloud what to do with it. One person suggested he use it for his keys or his change. He decided that it would be part of the service and would hold the water. Then during the Eucharist, the little girl helped Nouwen with the water and the wine.

In the afternoon, we shared lunch with a member of the community. Then we toured Daybreak. One house group was eating their lunch when we entered, and Nouwen happily sat down for a second afternoon meal of pancakes. The group was an international one, and I was surprised that none of the assistants were Canadian. One was American, an-

other Filipino, and a third was British. Nouwen chatted happily with his neighbors. They tried to persuade him to stay and watch “Star Wars,” the video they had just rented. He graciously declined. When I tried to take some pictures, he jollied shy people into smiling.

From there we headed over to his office. It was immaculate, but Nouwen could not find anything. He ransacked his filing cabinet and bookshelves with no success. Three times in the span of fifteen minutes, he had to phone his secretary for help. Finally, he loaded me down with essays, pictures, and magazines.

Our day was winding to a close and Nouwen was tired. No wonder, after an intense interview, leading Eucharist, doing spiritual direction with two community members, and still needing to prepare a sermon for the next day. I don’t know what I had expected, but a friend had asked me to share her spiritual problem with him. I broached the issue. Even though our time was essentially up, he stopped everything, sat down, and looked deeply thoughtful. Then he began a long, careful response to the concern raised. Again, he perceptively pierced to the heart of the matter. “Somehow she has to find herself deeply loved, so that she doesn’t have to be angry at God nor at herself. Someone has to sit with her, talk with her, hold her. Somebody who’s safe, who’s not interested in anything but in bringing her closer to the heart of God.”

His answer took the better part of an hour. And when he was finished, I thought sadly of my friend and her pain, wondering if I could do justice to Nouwen’s words. “I’ll try to pass that on,” I offered timidly. “Gently, gently,” he softly counseled.

Nouwen’s career has included a dizzying array of changes. Born in 1932,

he is a Dutch diocesan priest who has lived most of the last two decades in North America. He has taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. He also spent extended periods of time at the Abbey of Genesee, in the North American College in Rome, and in numerous Latin American countries. He is widely known because of his many books—over twenty at last count—on spirituality and ministry. In his writing, Nouwen always shares openly and intimately from his own spiritual journey. “Somehow I have to trust that God is at work in me and that the way I am being moved to new inner and outer places is part of a larger movement of which I am only a very small part,” he wrote recently.

Nouwen has much to say to Christians who are politically and socially involved. He is passionately concerned about a whole range of social issues, giving special attention to liberation theology and the matter of U.S. intervention in Central America. Yet he cautions against losing sight of Jesus and being carried into frenetic activism.

Nouwen told me how God has worked in his life and brought him on a spiritual journey to l’Arche. After a restless, life-long search, he finally seems to have found a home. It was a rich day of sharing for us. And by the end of it, I found that Nouwen had ever so gently nudged me a little closer to the heart of God. —Arthur Boers

Considering all the books you’ve written and all the places you’ve been, did you ever wonder if you were being obedient to God’s will?

When I was asked to come to Yale, my bishop said I could go for a few years; I stayed ten. Meanwhile, I became an associate professor, then a tenured, full professor. I was doing well on the level of my ambitions, and I am ambitious in a certain sense. But I began to question whether I was really doing God’s will. Was I being obedient? Was I the priest I wanted to be? Was I really looking for God, and not for my own success and career? After all, you can become successful talking about God—but that can be a trap. You can be praised for your sermons on humility! I felt I needed to get back to basics.

How did you respond to these questions?

I prayed: “God, you know what I

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should do. Let me know, and I will follow you. I will go anywhere you want. But you have to be very clear about it.” I liked being at Yale. I liked to teach, but I knew it wasn’t for life. During my time at Yale, my spiritual life wasn’t deep. I wasn’t praying much. I was lonely and needy. I needed to be liked by people, and I needed to be successful. I didn’t have much inner peace.

In 1981 I suddenly had this feeling that I wanted to go to Latin America and work with the poor. I’d been there many summers and felt that I should go. I resigned at Yale, and people questioned if I was doing the wise thing. I didn’t have much support.

So you tried to find a vocation in Latin America?

But I quickly realized that wasn’t my vocation at all. God had not called me there. I was driven there. At some level I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something for the poor. I felt guilty for having been in academic settings.

While in Latin America, I spent a lot of time with liberation theologians—especially Gustavo Gutiérrez. He didn’t encourage me to stay there. He said, “Maybe they need you more at the university to talk about Latin America. Do reverse mission to the first world from the third world. You have the gift of the word, and you can write. Perhaps that’s what you should do instead of being busy in a parish.”

More deeply, I felt it hard to be there. People were good to me, welcoming, remarkably hospitable. But being in Latin America didn’t seem to be my vocation. It wasn’t God’s call. Meanwhile, Harvard asked me to join their faculty. So though I left Latin America, I was unclear about where I was really headed.

When you returned to North America, you were active on behalf of Central American issues.

Just before I joined the Harvard faculty, I visited Nicaragua. I was so impressed by what I saw. And I was so convinced of the dangers of military

intervention, I felt I had to go back to the U.S. and speak about the situation. So a tour all over the country was set up for me. I spoke about the spiritual struggles of the people in Central America and called churches to think about that. It was spiritual work—not political. Though my message had political implications, I was basically calling Christians to consciousness about what was happening there.

When I finally finished this tour, I was absolutely exhausted. Not just tired. My soul was somewhat broken. It was as if someone was saying to me, “Are you trying to save the world? Where is your heart in all this? Who holds you safe?” I felt I was losing my soul and that God was not supporting me.

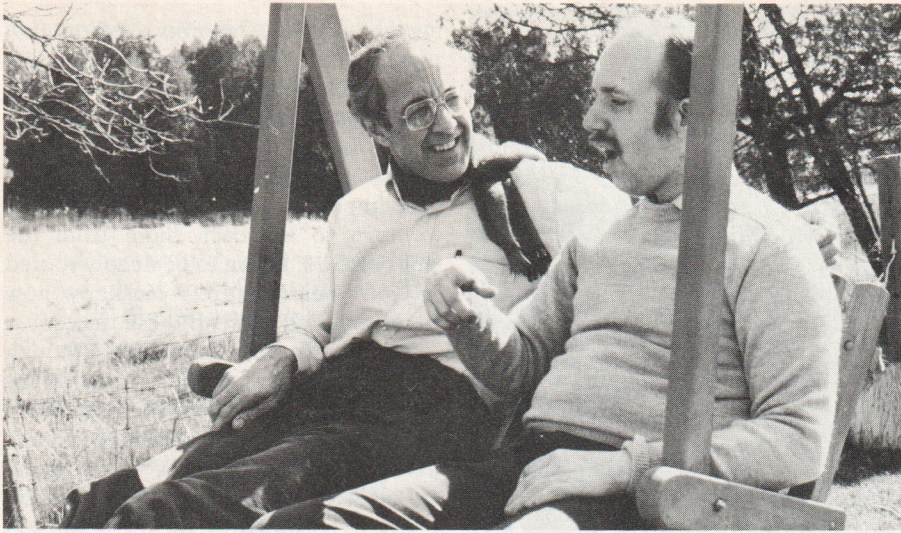
What did you do?

I was so exhausted I asked Jean Vanier if I could visit his community. I went to l’Arche in France and collapsed for six or seven weeks. Then I suddenly realized that this community felt like home. The people were radically different. They said, “Henri, why don’t you come and waste some time? Why don’t you just pray? You don’t have to do anything. We are so glad to see you not doing things.” For the first time, people were caring for me.

I also realized that handicapped people didn’t love or care for me because I write books or take trips. They don’t know that. If they express love, it comes from God. When I came to l’Arche, it was when my whole life was tired. But God said, “I love you. I want to hold you.” Finally God had the chance to really hug me and get divine hands right in my heart through this community.

Did you then decide to join l’Arche?

Though I felt a lot better, that’s as far as I went at that time. I went back to Harvard. I tried to talk about Latin America, but discovered that everyone had an enormous need to talk about prayer and contemplation. They asked me about the inner life, the spiritual life, the ministry. Even though I was



integrating a lot of the Latin American dimensions, I was focusing on the life of the spirit. I loved it.

But at the same time, I had the feeling that Harvard was not where God wanted me. It's too much podium, too much publicity, too public. Too many people came to listen. Plus Harvard is intensely competitive. It's not an intimate place. It's a place of intellectual battle. On the one hand, I loved being there—I made some beautiful friends. But at the same time, I didn't feel it was a safe place where I could deepen my spiritual life.

I had to pray more. I had to be more quiet. I had to be in community. So I resigned from Harvard—not knowing where to go. Except that I had a connection with Vanier and his community. So I went to l'Arche for a year; I wasn't saying I would stay permanently.

During that year, I did a lot of thinking. I prayed, "God, what do you want me to do?" But I wasn't doing much. I was just being there—listening and feeling what the world was doing. Then I got a beautiful letter from the Daybreak community in Canada calling me to be their priest. They said, "We have something to offer you, and we have something to receive from you." It was the first time in my whole life I felt called to anything. All the other times, I had made a lot of initiatives. But this time I felt God was calling me. I wondered if this letter was the answer to my prayer.

In your book *Gracias!*, you mention your niece being born with Down's Syndrome. Did this influence your decision to come to l'Arche?

Her condition was a very real experi-

ence for me, but it wasn't one that made me interested in working with mentally handicapped people. My desire to go to l'Arche was much more of a spiritual journey. In fact, I only discovered mentally handicapped people in the context of my spiritual search. I just wanted to find a place where I could live the spiritual life more radically and with more integrity.

Isn't that Jean Vanier's story as well?

Yes. Vanier was never interested in mentally handicapped people per se. He was interested in the poor for his own salvation. He wanted to bind himself to the poor. He happened to be in France where his spiritual director Thomas Philippe lived. Thomas, a Dominican priest, was a chaplain for mentally handicapped people. He said to Jean, "Maybe it would be good if you could take some mentally handicapped people out of the institution and live with them." For Jean, that they were mentally handicapped people was secondary; they could have been prisoners or drug addicts.

In being here I have discovered what a gift mentally handicapped people are and how wonderful relationships are with them. But only now am I coming to see that. It wasn't what brought me here.

Why is l'Arche so special?

LArche has its own unique tone. It's not an institution. It's not a group home. It's not even an organization that wants to help as many mentally handicapped persons as possible. It's a spiritual community where handicapped people are in the center. l'Arche exists

not to help the mentally handicapped get "normal," but to help them share their spiritual gifts with the world. The poor of spirit are given to us for our conversion. In their poverty, the mentally handicapped reveal God to us and hold us close to the gospel. That's a vision we have to nurture and deepen. I'm just beginning to discover it. I'm no expert on it; nobody really is. But we live it very tenderly.

What is your role here?

I try to live my vocation as a priest in this community. I am not a chaplain. A prison has a chaplain. The army has a chaplain. I am not the director. I am a member of the community, first of all. Then I am the priest here, ministering to an ecumenical group. I'm responsible for the spiritual life here. My particular vocation is to call people to prayer, to be sensitive to needs, and to do some spiritual formation.

Do you feel like you fit in?

I feel God sent me here. What's so amazing is that I don't know anything about mentally handicapped people. Secondly, I have never lived in a community before. Thirdly, I was called here to that which I was least prepared for. No lecturing—nobody wants to hear lectures. Writing is practically impossible here. This is a hard place because it asks a lot of a person's soul. Yet I've never felt so clearly called, and I never felt so clearly the paradox of being called where they don't need all that I have. I feel God wanted me to just come and be obedient. To discover that mentally handicapped people, the broken people, the poor in spirit—*poor* is a better word than *handicapped*—were going to teach me.

But why do you think God wanted you here?

To teach me what seminary and theology didn't: how to love God and how to discover the presence of God in my own heart. This was a gift to me. The poor also taught me to be willing to receive from others. People are not looking at me as somebody who does things by himself. I still get invitations to speak all over the world, but I have to say no. My community says it's more important to stay here instead of flying all over. It's more important to spend an evening with someone who can't speak or do anything, than speak to

thousands of people. God wants me here to be obedient to a more hidden way.

What are you learning in this obedience?

One of the beautiful lessons this community has taught me is if I do go and lecture, I take one of the handicapped people with me. I can stay close that way.

With our new house of prayer here, we have more time to pray than usual. The community suggests that I stay in touch with the "first love." Those words, "first love," are important to me. God loves us with a first love. John says, "Love one another, because I first loved you." The love of people is beautiful, but it's a reflection—a refraction, actually—of God's first love.

The second love—whether it's friends, men, women, or community—cannot fulfill my heart. But I can be grateful for them if I am deeply rooted in the first love. It means an enormous loneliness at times. A second loneliness. The first loneliness basically believes no human being is going to fulfill your heart, and you're really alone. But that is a good aloneness. Because that's where God speaks to you. That's a loneliness you have to nurture, instead of trying to get over it.

Have you experienced any "dark nights of the soul" here?

Last summer, my inner struggle became very intense. I realized I needed to deepen my spiritual life. Also, being among handicapped people, I discovered my own handicaps—particularly around the issues of affection and friendship. I didn't know what God wanted me to do in terms of my need for more intimacy than the community was able to give.

All of this was too deep to consider while living here. So I had to leave for a bit. The community supported my decision. I lived basically as a hermit. I did a lot of writing and had some good spiritual direction. I was able to work on important questions: Do I really give my whole heart to God or do I still want all these goodies? Can I really let go? Can I really die from a lot of stuff that seems to be so important?

In all those earlier years of my career, I tried hard to prove to myself and the world that I'm OK. But now God was saying, "I love you even when none of that takes place." I didn't know how to

believe that God loves me with a first love.

God wants my heart to be totally given to the first love, so that I will really trust God and give everything away. I'm still not able to do that. I say, "Leave your father, leave your mother, leave your brother, leave your sister, leave your possessions, leave your success. Don't cling to friends. Trust that God will give all you need. But do I really believe it? Jesus said, "Are you able to drink the cup? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism I'm baptized with?" I say I can—sometimes. But when I realize what it means, I start balking.

I'm still in the middle of a journey. It's not like I have figured it all out and now everything is wonderful. In fact, coming to l'Arche has opened up so much I'm just beginning to discover. There's so much more to go through. I had an incredible feeling that I'm called to be here, but it's also the hardest place for me to be.

How long do you think you'll stay at l'Arche?

The bishop in Utrecht gave me formal permission to be here three years. I obviously hope to stay longer. The church can continue to call me any place, and I have to be obedient. But I have a deep feeling my bishop will be sympathetic to my staying. I personally feel I'm just discovering not only l'Arche but also the world that it represents. And I would probably be more faithful to my vocation and to the church if I could continue living here. But that has to be affirmed by my bishop.

If God has something else in mind, I am convinced it will become clear. I did feel when I came to l'Arche that it was a different thing than when I went to Harvard or Yale. I *never* thought about remaining there for life. That was merely a professional identity. Here it's much more like belonging to a family.

How do you live out your commitment to the world and the issues of our day in this "hidden" calling?

By coming I made a choice, a choice that I had to interiorize. After two years here, I'm I was just getting a glimpse of the real spiritual life. I have to learn everyday—not about mentally handicapped people; they're my friends and they're part of my life. It's more learn-

ing about God, humility, community, prayer, and being one of God's broken people. I'm learning to trust that God wants me to be here.

The issues of the world—like Nicaragua or Angola or South Africa—are very important and crucial. But I have to learn to approach them from the heart of God. I have to be deeply rooted in God's heart before I can know how to respond faithfully to these issues.

I know that this community, although very small, has something to say to the world. I don't feel I have left the world and hidden myself. For a long time, I have to be careful not to dissipate myself with all sorts of burning issues. I have to trust that by staying home and staying more focused, new connections with the larger world will grow and I will discover how God wants me to respond to them. Maybe by prayer. Maybe by writing. Maybe by speaking once in a while. Or maybe by inviting people into this community. But my whole way of looking at the world is shifting radically. Not away from it, but more to the heart of it.

So in staying close to home, you see the truths of liberation spirituality?

Yes, I've seen that God speaks to us through the poor. And the people I live with here are really poor. Not in an economic way, but they are empty. They don't have much capacity to analyze things. They're poor in terms of even their emotions at times. But their heart is open to God. They may be stripped of a lot of human skills, but in their poverty they are open to God. Their heart—and by heart, I mean the center of their being—is so poor in a way that God can dwell there.

I'm more and more convinced, in the deepest sense, that God's preferential option for the poor—a liberation theology concept—is true. But I never expected to see it here. I now realize how much I'm learning and receiving from the poor. The church really needs to hear more and more of that.

One of the most mysterious things is that the poor hold us together. The poor here make us a community; they make us a church. We have people from the Philippines, United States, Canada. I'm from Holland. We're all from different religious backgrounds. What holds us together as a community is not an idea. It's not a vision. It's the poor.

In that sense, liberation theology is still very important for me. Maybe not

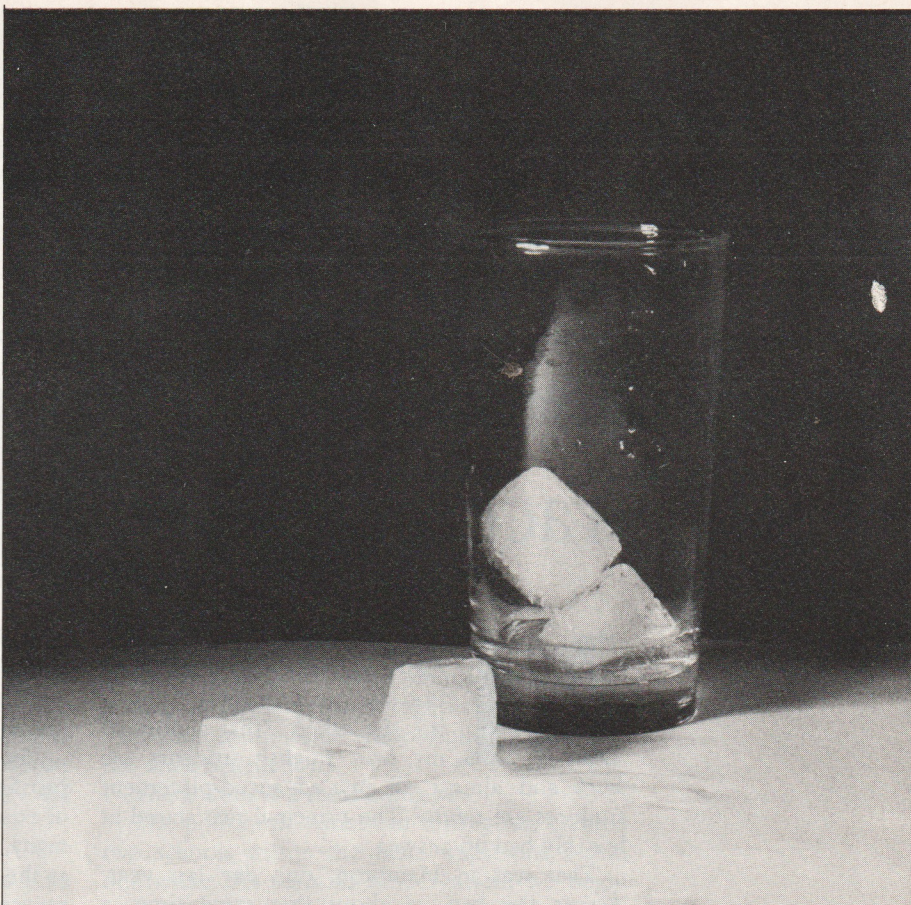
in the way it's thought of in Latin America. I am with people who are poor in spirit. They teach me that being is more important than doing, the heart is more important than the mind, and doing things together is more important than doing things alone.

What would you say to those of us who are trying to live out the interconnectedness of justice and faith?

You must make the connection between prayer and life. The closer you are to the heart of God, the closer you come to the heart of the world, the closer you come to others. God is a demanding God, but when you give your heart to God, you find your heart's desires. You will also find your brother and sister right there. We're called always to action, but that action must not be driven, obsessive, or guilt-ridden. Basically, it's action that comes out of knowing God's love. You want to be with the poor because with them you're not trying to please the world and be accepted.

That's my big inner struggle: to be so convinced of God's love that I don't need all these human affirmations. I want to enjoy being with people and not be anxious over whether they like me or not. I believe if I'm drawn into the heart of God, then I'm free to really care for people without wanting anything in return. Our spirituality should come from living deeply with the poor. A spirituality of being with vulnerable people and of being vulnerable with them—that's the great journey! **TOS**

Five of Henri Nouwen's books are available by mail from The Other Side. *In the Name of Jesus* offers reflections on Christian leadership (#156, \$10.95). *Lifesigns* is Henri Nouwen's creative reflections on the Christian life as a movement from the "house of fear" to the "house of love" (#077, \$11.95). *Compassion* is a classic exploration of Jesus' way of living (#005, \$6.95). *Letters to Marc* is a collection of Nouwen's letters to a nephew on Jesus as the heart of our existence (#140, \$12.95). *With Open Hands* is Nouwen's reflections on prayer, matched with beautiful photography (#171, \$3.95). Use the order card in this issue.



So-So

So-so painting on the wall
about all I have left of you
my dear one
You bought it for me
from an exhibit on the boardwalk
before you died in your young years
We would roam the canvas
past fields of barley
cornflowers painted a bit too blue
overblown Queen Anne's lace
walk down the dusty road to a farm
where the lady of the house
would invite us up to her porch
for lemonade
Still I walk down the dusty road
to the farm where the lady of the house
would invite us up to her porch
for a frosty glass of lemonade

Emilie Glen