

HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

**With Burning Hearts**  
*A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* ✨

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With Burning Hearts

ORBIS



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"Christ Teaching His Disciples."

"The Disciples on the Road to Emmaus."

"The Last Supper."

"Christ's Appearance on Lake Tiberias."

"Christ's Appearance on the Mountain."

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For more information about Henri Nouwen, his work, and the work of the Henri Nouwen Society, visit [www.HenriNouwen.org](http://www.HenriNouwen.org)

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[T]wo people are walking together. You can see from the way they walk that they are not happy. Their bodies are bent over, their faces are downcast, their movements slow. They do not look at each other. Once in a while they utter a word, but their words are not directed to each other. They vanish in the air as useless sounds. Although they follow the path on which they walk, they seem to have no goal. They return to their home, but their home is no longer home. They simply have no other place to go. Home has become emptiness, disillusionment, despair.

They can hardly imagine that it was only a few years ago when they had met someone who had changed their lives, someone who had radically interrupted their daily routines and had brought a new vitality to every part of their existence. They had left their village, followed that stranger and his friends, and dis-

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covered a whole new reality hidden behind the veil of their ordinary activities—a reality in which forgiveness, healing, and love were no longer mere words but powers touching the very core of their humanity. The stranger from Nazareth had made everything new. He had made them into people for whom the world was no longer a burden but a challenge, no longer a field of snares but a place with endless opportunities. He had brought joy and peace to their daily experience. He had made their life into a dance!

Now he is dead. His body that had radiated light had been destroyed under the hands of his torturers. His limbs had been ploughed by the instruments of violence and hatred, his eyes had become empty holes, his hands had lost their grip, his feet their firmness. He had become a nobody among nobodies. All had come to nothing. They had lost him. Not just him, but, with

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him, also themselves. The energy that had filled their days and nights had left them completely. They had become two lost human beings, walking home without having a home, returning to what had become a dark memory.

In many ways we are like them. We know it when we dare to look into the center of our being and encounter there our lostness. Aren't we lost too?

If there is any word that summarizes well our pain, it is the word "loss." We have lost so much! Sometimes it even seems that life is just one long series of losses. When we were born we lost the safety of the womb, when we went to school we lost the security of our family life, when we got our first job we lost the freedom of youth, when we got married or ordained we lost the joy of many options, and when we grew old we lost our good looks, our old friends, or our fame. When we became

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weak or ill, we lost our physical independence, and when we die we will lose it all! And these losses are part of the ordinary life! But whose life is ordinary? The losses that settle themselves deeply in our hearts and minds are the loss of intimacy through separations, the loss of safety through violence, the loss of innocence through abuse, the loss of friends through betrayal, the loss of love through abandonment, the loss of home through war, the loss of well-being through hunger, heat, and cold, the loss of children through illness or accidents, the loss of country through political upheaval, and the loss of life through earthquakes, floods, plane crashes, bombings, and diseases.

Perhaps many of these dark losses are far away from most of us; maybe they belong to the world of newspapers and television screens, but nobody can escape the agonizing losses that are part of our everyday

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existence-the loss of our dreams. We had thought so long of ourselves as successful, liked, and deeply loved. We had hoped for a life of generosity, service, and self-sacrifice. We had planned to become forgiving, caring, and always gentle people. We had a vision of ourselves as reconcilers and peacemakers. But somehow-we aren't even sure of what happened-we lost our dream. We became worrying, anxious people clinging to the few things we had collected and exchanging with one another news of the political, social, and ecclesiastical scandals of the day. It is this loss of spirit that is often hardest to acknowledge and most difficult to confess.

But beyond all of these things there is the loss of faith-the loss of the conviction that our life has meaning. For a time we were able to bear our losses and even to live them with fortitude and perseverance because we lived them as losses that would bring us closer to

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God. The pain and suffering of life were bearable because we lived them as ways to test our will power and deepen our conviction. But as we grow older we discover that what supported us for so many years-prayer, worship, sacraments, community life, and a clear knowledge of God's guiding love-has lost its grip on us. Long-cherished ideas, long-practiced disciplines, and long-held customs of celebrating life can no longer warm our hearts, and we no longer understand why and how we were so motivated. We remember the time that Jesus was so real for us that we had no question about his presence in our lives. He was our most intimate friend, our counsel or and guide. He gave us comfort, courage, and confidence. We could feel him, yes, taste and touch him. And now( We no longer think of him very much, we no longer desire to spend long hours in his presence. We no longer have that special



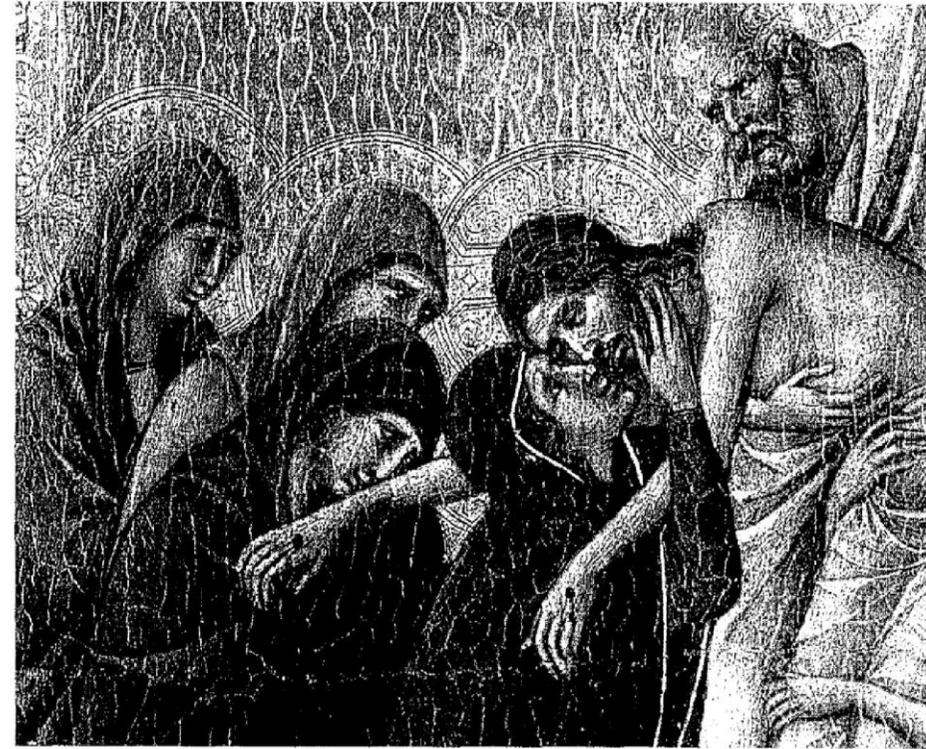
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feeling about him. We even wonder if he is more than just a figure out of a story book. Many of our friends laugh at him, mock his name, or simply ignore him. Gradually we have come to the realization that for us too he has become a stranger~somehow we lost him.

I am not trying to suggest that all of these losses will touch each of our lives. But as we walk together and listen to each other we will soon discover that many, if not most, of these losses are part of the journey, our own journey or the journey of our companions.

What to do with our losses~That's the first question that faces us. Are we hiding them~ Are we going to live as if they weren't reaP Are we going to keep them away from our fellow travelers? Are we going to convince ourselves or others that our losses are little compared to our gains~Are we going to blame someone~ We



do all of these things most of the time, but there is another possibility: the possibility of mourning. Yes, we must mourn our losses. We cannot talk or act them away, but we can shed tears over them and allow ourselves to grieve deeply. To grieve is to allow our losses to tear apart feelings of security and safety and lead us to the painful truth of our brokenness. Our grief makes us experience the abyss of our own life in which nothing is settled, clear, or obvious, but everything constantly shifting and changing.

And as we feel the pain of our own losses, our grieving hearts open our inner eye to a world in which losses are suffered far beyond our own little world of family, friends, and colleagues. It is the world of prisoners, refugees, AIDS patients, starving children, and the countless human beings living in constant fear. Then the pain of our crying hearts connects us with the

moaning and groaning of a suffering humanity. Then our mourning becomes larger than ourselves.

But in the midst of all this pain, there is a strange, shocking, yet very surprising voice. It is the voice of the one who says: "Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted." That's the unexpected news: there is a blessing hidden in our grief. Not those who comfort are blessed, but those who mourn! Somehow, in the midst of our tears, a gift is hidden. Somehow, in the midst of our mourning, the first steps of the dance take place. Somehow, the cries that well up from our losses belong to our songs of gratitude.

We come to the Eucharist with hearts broken by many losses, our own as well as those of the world. Like the two disciples who walked home to their village we say: "Our hope had been ... but we lost hope. Torture and death have come instead." Our heads are no longer

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erect, looking forward, but "downcast" and bent to the ground.

This is how the journey starts. The question is whether our losses lead to resentment or to gratitude. Resentment is a real option. Many choose it. When we are hit by one loss after another, it is very easy to become disillusioned, angry, bitter, and increasingly resentful. The older we become, the greater is the temptation to say: "Life has cheated me. There is no future for me, nothing to hope for. The only thing to do is to defend the little I have left, so that I won't lose it all."

Resentment is one of the most destructive forces in our lives. It is cold anger that has settled into the center of our being and hardened our hearts. Resentment can become a way of life that so pervades our words and actions that we no longer recognize it as such.

I often wonder how I would live if there were no

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resentment at all in my heart. I am so used to talking about people I do not like, to harboring memories about events that gave me much pain, or to acting with suspicion and fear that I do not know how it would be if there were nothing to complain about and nobody to gripe about! My heart still has many corners that hide my resentments and I wonder if I really want to be without them. What would I do without these resentments? And there are many moments in life in which I have the opportunity to nurture them. Before breakfast I have already had many feelings of suspicion, jealousy, many thoughts about people I prefer to avoid, and many little plans to live my day in a guarded way.

I wonder if there are any people without resentments. Resentment is such an obvious response to our many losses. The tragedy is that much resentment is hidden within the church. It is one of the most paralyz-

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ing aspects of the Christian community.

Still, the Eucharist presents another option. It is the possibility to choose, not resentment, but gratitude. Mourning our losses is the first step away from resentment and toward gratitude. The tears of our grief can soften our hardened hearts and open us to the possibility to say "thanks."

The word "Eucharist" means literally "act of thanksgiving." To celebrate the Eucharist and to live a Eucharistic life has everything to do with gratitude. Living Eucharistically is living life as a gift, a gift for which one is grateful. But gratitude is not the most obvious response to life, certainly not when we experience life as a series of losses! Still, the great mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist and live in a Eucharistic life is precisely that through mourning our losses we come to know life as a gift. The beauty and preciousness of life is

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intimately linked with its fragility and mortality. We can experience that every day-when we take a flower in our hands, when we see a butterfly dance in the air, when we caress a little baby. Fragility and giftedness are both there, and our joy is connected with both.

Each Eucharist begins with a cry for God's mercy. There is probably no prayer in the history of Christianity that has been prayed so frequently and intimately as the prayer "Lord, have mercy." It is the prayer that not only stands at the beginning of all Eucharistic liturgies of the West but also sounds as an ongoing cry through all Eastern liturgies. Lord, have mercy, *Kyrie Eleison, Gospody Pomiloe*. It's the cry of God's people, the cry of people with a contrite heart.

This cry for mercy is possible only when we are willing to confess that somehow, somewhere, we ourselves have something to do with our losses. Crying for

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mercy is a recognition that blaming God, the world, or others for our losses does not do full justice to the truth of who we are. At the moment we are willing to take responsibility, even for the pain we didn't cause directly; blaming is converted into an acknowledgment of our own role in human brokenness.

The prayer for God's mercy comes from a heart that knows that this human brokenness is not a fatal condition of which we have become the sad victims, but the bitter fruit of the human choice to say "No" to love. The disciples who walked home to Emmaus were sad because they had lost the one in whom they had put all their hope, but they were also deeply aware that their own leaders had crucified him. Somehow they knew that their grief was connected with evil, an evil that they could recognize in their own hearts.

Celebrating the Eucharist requires that we stand

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in this world accepting our co-responsibility for the evil that surrounds and pervades us. As long as we remain stuck in our complaints about the terrible times in which we live and the terrible situations we have to bear and the terrible fate we have to suffer, we can never come to contrition. And contrition can grow only out of a contrite heart. When our losses are pure fate, our gains are pure luck. Fate does not lead to contrition, nor luck to gratitude.

Indeed, the conflicts in our personal lives as well as the conflicts on regional, national, or world scales are *our* conflicts, and only by claiming responsibility for them can we move beyond them—choosing a life of forgiveness, peace, and love.

The *Kyrie Eleison-Lord*, have mercy—must emerge from a contrite heart. In contrast to a hardened heart, a contrite heart is a heart that does not blame but



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acknowledges its own part in the sinfulness of the world and so has been made ready to receive God's mercy.

I still remember an evening meditation on Dutch television during which the speaker poured water on hard, dried-out soil, saying, "Look, the soil cannot receive the water and no seed can grow." Then, after crumbling the soil with his hands and pouring water on it again, he said, "It is only the broken soil that can receive the water and make the seed grow and bear fruit."

After seeing this I understood what it meant to begin the Eucharist with a contrite heart, a heart broken open, to receive the water of God's grace.

But how is it possible to begin a thanksgiving celebration with a broken heart? Don't the acknowledgment of our sinful condition and the awareness of our co-responsibility for the evil in the world paralyze us?

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Isn't a true confession of sins too debilitating? Yes, it is! But no sin can be faced without some knowledge of grace. No loss can be mourned without some intuition that we will find new life.

When the disciples walking to Emmaus told their story about their great loss, they also told that strange story about the women who had found the tomb empty and had seen angels. But they were skeptical and doubtful. Wasn't he crucified a few days ago? Hadn't everything come to an end? Hadn't evil finally won? So what about these women's tales that he was alive? Who could take that seriously? But then again, they had to say, "Some of our friends went to the tomb and found everything exactly as the women had reported, but of him they saw nothing!"

That's how we generally approach the Eucharist. With a strange mixture of despair and hope. Part of us

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looking at our own life and the lives of those around us wants to say, "Let's forget about it. It's all over.. Oh, sure we thought about a better world, imagined a new community of love, and dreamt about a time in which all people would live together in peace. But the truth has caught up with us. We now know that all of this was little more than an illusion. Our unchangeable character and persistent bad habits, our jealousies and resentments, our moments of anger and revenge, our uncontrollable violence, the countless signs of human cruelty, the crimes, the torture, the wars, the exploitations-all of these have surely woken us up to the bitter truth that our youthful hope has been crucified."

And still-the other stories remain and continue to appear.. Stories about a few people who saw it differently, stories about gestures of forgiveness and healing, stories about goodness, beauty, and truth. And as we lis-

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ten carefully to the deeper voices in our heart we realize that beneath our skepticism and cynicism there is a yearning for love, unity, and communion that doesn't go away even when there remain so many arguments to dismiss it as sentimental childhood memories.

"Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy." That's the prayer that keeps emerging from the depth of our being and breaking through the walls of our cynicism. Yes, we are sinners, hopeless sinners; everything is lost and nothing is left of our hopes and dreams. Still, there is a voice: "My grace is enough for you!" and we cry again for the healing of our cynical hearts and dare to believe that, indeed, in the midst of our mourning, we can find a gift to be grateful for. But for this discovery we need a special companion!

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