

ADVENT *and*
CHRISTMAS
WISDOM
— *from* —
HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

Daily Scripture and Prayers

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Together With Nouwen's Own Words

A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication



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Epigraph

THE ADVENT JOURNEY is an invitation to climb the mountain of the Lord. The journey consists of a slow, gradual ascending up the mountain path. As with all uphill climbing, there are certain dangers along the way, but also the joyful expectation of one day reaching the mountaintop that is the house of the Lord.

BROTHER VICTOR ANTOINE D'AVILA-LATOURRETTE

Introduction

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN (1932–1996) was born in the Netherlands into a staunchly Catholic family. Henri, the oldest of four children, had two brothers and one sister. From an early age he expressed a desire to enter the priesthood. Henri was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Utrecht in 1957.

After ordination, Henri spent six years studying psychology at the University of Nijmegen and two more years in training at the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas.

Henri taught at Notre Dame and Harvard. Always restless, he spent time living as a monk in the Trappist Monastery of the Genesee in upstate New York, did further study at the Ecumenical Institute at Collegeville, Minnesota, and also served as a visiting scholar at the North American College in Rome. He also took up a temporary ministry to South America where he lived in Peru.

Returning to the United States, Henri taught briefly at Harvard and, upon meeting Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, an international group of communities that care for people with disabilities, accepted an invitation to become pastor for the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto, Canada.

Henri took two sabbaticals from his work at Daybreak, one to recover from a severe depression, and the other to pursue his writing. Several weeks after his last sabbatical, Henri suffered two heart attacks.

As a priest, friend, author, lecturer, and counselor, Henri



was a popular figure. Among his books are *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (1969), *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (1972), *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (1974), *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (1979), *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (1981), *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (1983) along with many others.

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How to Use This Book

ADVENT—that period of great anticipatory joy—is a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ’s arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25—the Sunday closest to November 30 which is the feast of Saint Andrew, one of Jesus’ first disciples.

The annual commemoration of Christ’s birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle which runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany. In keeping with the unfolding of the message of the liturgical year, this book is designed to be used during the entire period from the First Sunday of Advent to the end of the Christmas cycle.

The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four different ways that Christ comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant in Bethlehem; (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers; (3) at his death; and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day.

Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Christ at Christmas. Christ’s Second Coming will also one day abruptly interrupt our sojourn here on earth.

Since the calendar dictates the number of days in Advent, this book includes Scripture quotations and meditative excerpts from the works of Henri J. M. Nouwen for a full twenty-eight days. These twenty-eight daily readings make up Part I of the



book. It is suggested that the reader begin at the beginning and, on Christmas Day, switch to Part II which contains materials for the twelve days of Christmas. If there are any “extra” entries from Part I, these may be read by doubling up days, if so desired, or by reading two entries on the weekends. Alternately, one may just skip those entries that do not fit within the Advent time frame for that particular year.

Each “day” in this book begins with the words of Henri Nouwen, taken from various sources which are acknowledged on pages 84 to 87. Following that quotation is an excerpt from Scripture, which is related in some way to the beginning quote. Next is provided a small prayer, also built on the ideas from the two preceding passages. Finally, an Advent or Christmas activity is suggested as a way to apply the messages to one’s daily life.

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PART I



READINGS *for*
ADVENT

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DAY 1

In the Midst of Our Dark World

I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me and others of God's saving power....Our temptation is to be distracted by them....When I have no eyes for the small signs of God's presence—the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement and gestures of love offered by friends—I will always remain tempted to despair.

The small child of Bethlehem, the unknown man of Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the naked man on the cross, *he* asks for my full attention. The work of our salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout, scream, and overwhelm us with its claims and promises.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN,
GRACIAS! A LATIN AMERICAN JOURNAL

HIDDEN HOPE

*A shoot shall come out from the
stump of Jesse.
and a branch shall grow out of
his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and
understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the
fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of
the LORD.*

ISAIAH 11:1–3

PRAYER

We welcome you, small child of Bethlehem, whose coming we await with quiet attention. Shield us from the shouts, the screams, the empty promises of the season, and encourage us to turn our hopes to your coming. We know that the promise is hidden in the stable in Bethlehem and rooted in the offspring of Jesse; let us look for our salvation there. Amen.

ADVENT ACTION

Today I will look for one small sign that God is present in my daily life. I will give thanks for his presence. If he is absent, I will resolve to find out why.





DAY 2

The Root of Patience

The French author Simone Weil writes in her notebook: "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." Without patience our expectation degenerates into wishful thinking. Patience comes from the word "*patior*" which means "to suffer."...What seems a hindrance becomes a way; what seems an obstacle becomes a door; what seems a misfit becomes a cornerstone.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, *OUT OF SOLITUDE*

BLESSINGS FALLING ON THE FAITHFUL

We are confident of better things....For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

HEBREWS 6:9–12

PRAYER

Lord, give us patience so that we may truly see obstacles as doors, the “not-quite-rights” of life as a foundation, our sufferings and indifference as eventual gateways to good works, to diligent service, and to our inheritance of salvation. Make the challenges on our spiritual journey into opportunities to say “yes” to your love. Amen.

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ADVENT ACTION

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, by watchful alertness. Prepare the way of the Lord by making an Advent calendar of proposed contributions of service to others or positive changes in your own spiritual life. Don't plan too precisely, however; leave room for God's input.





DAY 3

In Solitude, In Activity

Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our lives are in danger. Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, without distance closeness cannot cure. Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures. The careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life and should therefore be the subjects of our most personal attention. Let us therefore look somewhat closer, first at our life in action, and at our life in solitude.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, *OUT OF SOLITUDE*

PREACHING AND PRAYING

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

MARK 1:35–39

PRAYER

Lord, grant me a taste for solitude so that I might find in my heart the holy place where you live and can tell you truthfully how I am feeling. Grant me also an understanding of when to act in response to your call to me. Amen.

ADVENT ACTION

Our Lord went out to a deserted place to pray before he started his journey throughout Galilee to proclaim the message of the Good News. Look back on your past life and identify its active moments. Also examine the times of solitude you have experienced. Assess how you functioned under both conditions. Make sure that in the coming Advent season there is a balance between the two aspects of your spiritual journey.





DAY 4

How Do You Pray?

*T*ake the gospel of each day and spend ten minutes with it. Read it, and read it again. Walk into the world with the gospel in your heart. The gospel word of the day can become like a painting on the walls of your inner room, the inner room that is your heart....You have chances every second to live this Word, but it has to be in you. It can't be just an idea, it has to sink from the mind into the heart. That's prayer—to let God's Word speak deep within you and tell you, "You are my beloved."

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN INTERVIEW,
LIGUORIAN MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 1992

FIRST THINGS FIRST

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...It is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

MATTHEW 6:25, 32–33

PRAYER

Lord, I live “out in the open” for most of my everyday life. Let me find the offspring of the root of Jesse so that his grace and blessings will flow to my “outer life” where I must face the turmoil and temptations of life. Grant me also a recognition of the fact that my “inner life” with you is the greatest reality. Amen.

ADVENT ACTION

Find a scriptural motto to add to your Advent preparation calendar. Hold these words in your heart each day. Some suggestions might be as follows: “The Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces” (Isa 25:8); “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?” (Jonah 9:11) or “Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; / bind them around your neck, / write them on the tablet of your heart” (Prov 3:3).





DAY 5

Staying Close to God

If you want to follow Jesus...[you must] control what you take in every day. When you are on the bus or subway, or in your car, why busy your mind with all the garbage of advertisements? Why fill your mind with television and radio? Somehow you have to decide what your mind will receive. I don't mean you shouldn't ever go to movies or watch television, but control what enters your mind and heart. It's not just a question of pushing bad things out but a question of holding on to something really good.

It is good to have a prayer on your lips wherever you go. There are so many moments in life when you are free to pray. When you are waiting for the cashier in the supermarket, getting mad because he or she doesn't hurry, say a little prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Take that prayer with you wherever you go.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN INTERVIEW,
LIGUORIAN MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 1992

PRAY ALWAYS

Be at peace among yourselves. And...admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12–18

PRAYER

Lord, let my life be an unceasing prayer to you despite its labors and losses; grant me a gracious heart that overflows with a gratitude to overcome and wash away all my worries. Amen.

ADVENT ACTION

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This Advent, be generous in your prayers for others and their well-being.

