

Henri Nouwen Lecture
26 November 2011 Janskerk Utrecht

PART ONE

From Generosity to Community

Thank you for your invitation
to remember and celebrate the life of Henri Nouwen.
I feel honoured to be here because I consider Henri Nouwen
a guide in the journey of my life
and a teacher in the life of my spirit.

I started reading Henri Nouwen's books when I was an adolescent.
He had the rare gift of making the gospel attractive to my young heart.
And even today, his writings are giving life to my faith
and they are relevant to my daily life.

Though I have never met him,
Henri Nouwen has accompanied me along two great paths:
the path of the mind and the path of the heart.

In my life,
the path of my mind took place in Italy, in the seminary
and the path of my heart took place in Kenya, in Saint Martin.
On the mind's path,
I *studied* Jesus to become a priest, a "father" to believers.
On the heart's path,
I *followed* Jesus to become a Christian, a brother to the poor.
In the seminary, my teachers were professors,
gifted in thinking and specialists in giving sermons.
In Saint Martin, my teachers were the poor,
gifted in simplicity and specialists in giving love.
In Italy, my formation was about information
and learning the value of communicating with the word.
In Kenya, my formation was about transformation
and learning the value of communicating with the body.

Both paths are as important as they are difficult,
but the longest path that a man can take, I'm told,
is to travel from his head to his heart.
In each of Henri Nouwen's books that I read,
I encounter a man who still hasn't stopped travelling this journey,
who, to this day, is present to me as a fellow pilgrim
on the journey from my head to my heart.

Before I continue,
allow me to take this chance to thank the people of the Netherlands
for their contribution to this path of the heart.

I have known many people from this country, and I cannot avoid mentioning three of them
who have challenged and encouraged me along the way:

Henri Nouwen is the first.
I am so grateful to him for using his words to share his wounds
and for using his wounds to share his soul.

Marleen Bannink is the second.
She was a volunteer in Saint Martin.
From the moment she arrived until the day she passed away
after being hit by a lorry when she was 20 years old,
she gave her heart to the street children of Nyahururu.

Ans Van Keulen is the third.
Together, we have shared a dream and started Saint Martin.
Without Ans, Saint Martin would not be what it is today,
and neither would I.

I wish to compare the beginning of Saint Martin with an image from the gospel:
In a way, Ans and I were like the women who went to the tomb of Jesus.
They went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body.
They were well equipped with their gifts and with bags full of the anointment
to honour their beloved's body.
But they went with great fear, and they travelled in the early morning dark.
Their plan was humble and, in a way, insignificant.
Somehow, it was an impossible plan because they did not have any idea
of how to remove the big and heavy stone from the tomb.

But these women had great hope and incredible trust.
They wanted to feel Jesus' presence,
to still hear his gentle voice call them by name.
Their desire for Jesus was a call of love so intense
that he rose from death to meet them.
God was waiting for this desire for all of eternity.
He was waiting for this call of love.
It is not only God who calls me with love,
but he is also waiting for my call of love.

Like those women of the resurrection,
Ans and I went to Africa with great desires in our hearts.
We wanted to promote a spirit of community in Kenya
and took the first steps in fear and darkness.

We were well equipped with our own gifts,
dreaming to call forth the best from the community,
but we had no idea how to remove the big stone and all the obstacles in our way.
Still, we were hoping and trusting with all of our hearts that something would happen.
And something did happen.

We witnessed the obstacles being removed, the light breaking through the night,
we had a chance to share our own gifts
and we received many more gifts.

We thought to call forth the best from the poor
but, as we did, the poor called forth the best from us.

We tried to bring Jesus to the people,
but, as we did, the people brought Jesus to us.

We wanted to remove the stone of segregation from people with disabilities,
but, as we did, the people with disabilities
removed the stones of segregation from our own hearts.

I have been invited to talk to you about this experience
about removing the stone from my heart
and from the heart of my community.

Really, that's the only thing I've been trying to do for the last 15 years.

- SLIDES OF SAINT MARTIN COMMUNITY
- SAINT MARTIN INTRODUCTION BY ANS...

Like Henri Nouwen, I now find myself living
in a community of L'Arche as a spiritual assistant.

- SLIDE COMMUNITY OF L'ARCHE

When Henri Nouwen was invited to talk,
he often used to go with a core member from his community.
Now, since some friends from my community
were going to Poland next week,
I asked them to join me today.

I introduce Paul:

- STORY OF PAUL

I have been very generous with Paul.
I met him 17 years ago,
and I assisted him with clothes, food, and medication.
I even provided him with circumcision
so that he could feel accepted like the others.
In our relationship, there was only one way:
from the top of my generosity to the bottom of his need.

He was the one in need, and I was the one who could rescue him.
This generosity made me proud but not happy.
So, allow me to talk a bit about generosity.

Many years ago, there was an earthquake in my native region
which killed more than 2000 people.
I quickly joined the rescue team.
My work was not to be involved in the rescuing of people
but in managing the donations.
The incredible amount of donations were another earthquake, an earthquake of generosity.
Why? Because people are good.

More recently, there was an incredible tsunami of water which was devastating in Asia,
but there was also an incredible tsunami of generosity from the whole world to help these people.
Why? Because people are good.

And I have no doubts that here in the Netherlands,
if an incredible emergency occurs, there will be an incredible reaction of generosity.
Why? Because people are good.

We thank the Lord for this generosity.
Generosity is good and can bring us closer together.
It is a good thing to write a cheque.
It is good to share what you have with the less fortunate.
If you do, both you and your beneficiary will probably feel satisfied,
but here's the problem—both will feel satisfied,
but no one leaves transformed.

Jesus warns us about the danger hidden behind generosity:
Great people like to be called benefactors...
...but among you, it should be different (Luke 22,25).
Paul is not only a beneficiary of my good actions as benefactor,
he is someone with wounds to be welcomed.
Perhaps I am ready to give charity to the poor,
but not to recognise him as my brother,
the one who looks like me and the one I am happy to live with.

The church I belong to
wants to do so many things for the disabled,
but not to recognise them as our brothers and sisters,
not to value their gifts.
Not one person with intellectual disabilities
has ever been proclaimed a Saint.
In my church we wish to be generous with the poor
but we are not ready to love them
and welcome them in our lives.

If we are only generous,
we are not getting to the best part,
we are not enjoying community.

Generosity is good
but it is best when it flows into a real meeting with the other
and this meeting should bring about a relationship among us
and this relationship should lead both of us into communion.
For communion is what we need.

I was generous with Paul but I was not happy, and he was not happy.
You can build a house for Paul,
grant a stipend every month to him,
provide assistance for his necessities,
but Paul will not be happy unless someone decides to live with him.

Now I live with Paul. We are sharing our lives.
We are listening to our stories, sharing our joys and carrying one another burdens.
I am discovering the gifts of Paul and he is discovering mine,
and, together, we are accepting with gentleness our limitations and weaknesses.
We are now being bound together in a relationship which makes us happy.

Ours is a normal life but, every day,
we live special moments of togetherness:
Eating together, washing the utensils.
Praying together, listening to our hearts.
Celebrating together, sharing our lives.

I just wish to remember the first birthday of Paul.
We had to invent the date because there was no record of his birth.
What we are used to doing is to bring a cake
and—after blowing out the candles—
giving ourselves some time to say something beautiful
about the person we are celebrating.
Paul was very happy to hear so many people appreciating him.

After almost an hour of compliments,
it was Paul's turn to say something,
but Paul was a bit sad and confused;
he asked for another round and we started again.
This is love, a love which was trying
to remove a big and heavy stone
from the entrance of Paul's heart.

And there's only one way to do this:
to reveal to Paul, his own beauty

and to repeat, to proclaim, to swear by it
until he is convinced of what he was never convinced of:
that he is lovable.

PART TWO

From Assisting to Loving

The world has taught me that I have to try always “to be the best”.
And now, I discover in myself a deep need to be the best or at least to belong to the best group.
I like athletics, but this year, Italy did very bad at the international world championship,
so I decided to join Kenya and to follow their many successes.
It feels good to belong to the group doing best.

The world has taught me “to be efficient and to be first,”
to be strong and to hide my weaknesses
(or to reveal them in a way which makes me seem uniquely honest and self-aware).

This is what the world teaches.
But what does Paul teach?
Paul teaches that strength lies in weakness,
that doing things “slow together is better than doing them fast alone,”
that speaking at this event is not as important
as sitting down with him afterwards at the same table,
sharing the same bread, saying a prayer of gratitude,
and communicating in a way which brings us into communion.
In other words,
to Paul, what I am
is more important than what I do.

Of course, it is good and often necessary to be efficient.
Some years ago, Paul needed the right prescription for his epilepsy
not too strong otherwise he sleeps, not too light otherwise he has seizures,
and we found an efficient, competent doctor who helped him.

We certainly need competent people in Africa.
I don't need to convince you of that.
Most people agree that we need compassion made of competence.
But what most people underestimate
is the power of another type of compassion,
a compassion made of presence.

After getting the right prescription,
Paul needs someone who wishes to live with him,
someone who says: I am happy to be with you!
It is a joy to live with you!

You are important for me!
Our dream in Saint Martin
is to combine the compassion of competence
with the compassion of presence,
knowing that one should not be without the other.

- PHOTO OF KABABA AND MICHAEL

A few weeks ago, I was running late in finalising a book we were to publish,
so I left my office in Saint Martin to work in my room in Effatha.
If I work there, I thought, I won't be so disturbed.
When Kababa realized that I had come home,
he came to visit me, asking me many questions and touching everything on my desk.
I kept calm and gently answered his questions
but tried to convince him to go back to his work.
Since he wouldn't leave,
I accompanied him back to James, the assistant Kababa was working with.
But James was in the common room,
so I was forced to greet everyone (greetings can take time in Kenya) .
And finally, I got back to my work.

Not 10 minutes had passed
before Kababa was back again, this time, with Michael.
Both were very happy to meet me in my room
and willing to share so many stories about the fun they were having together.
I wondered why I had not locked the door!
I tried to be patient, hoping their stories would finish soon,
but patience has never been my gift, and I took them back to James,
making sure he realized how disappointed I was
that he could not keep them from disturbing me.
I went back to my room and, this time, I locked the door.

In the evening, after supper, James asked me if I had finished the book.
I said I was almost through.
He asked if I was writing about them.
I said yes.
Then he asked me something that I will never forget:
"Father Gabriele, if you write less about us, could you remain more with us?"

When James asked me that, he was my angel,
inviting me to step out from my tomb.
You see, the service that I'm involved in, the fact that I work with the poor,
doesn't preserve me from a terrible danger: the danger of using the poor to get admiration.
The way some people use their titles or positions or money
to get admiration from others,
we can also use our "generosity" to get admired.

When you work with the poor, one of these two things usually occurs:

1. Living close to the poor leads you to satisfy your need to feel good and to win admiration from others.

Or

2. Living close to the poor leads you to be close to your own poverty.

Now, to explain better what I am trying to say let me tell you the story of George:

- PHOTO OF GEORGE AND HIS FAMILY

George was addicted to alcohol.

I helped him to enter a rehabilitation community for alcoholics where he was helped to come out of his addiction.

I can react to the success of George in two ways:

1. I can think about how George had tried to recover many times with the help of many people, but never succeeded until he met me.

And I can come here and tell you this story, hoping to win your admiration.

Or,

2. I can join George in his journey,

by discovering my own addictions which are much more hidden:

my addiction to being admired,

to feeling useful,

to being in control of myself and my time,

to being busy,

to being better,

and even my ridiculous addiction

to the consideration of my bishop.

An alcoholic can recover in 3 months,

but for my addictions, my whole life might not be enough.

Since his recovery, George has started 3 Alcoholics Anonymous groups.

I am very touched by these groups,

by these people who come together because of a common weakness,

who realize that they cannot step out from their tomb without the help of an angel.

I am amazed by anyone who has the courage to say

what these people always say:

We are not able to make it by ourselves;

we need your help.

- PHOTO OF MARY

Last week, I found a young mother before 7.00 am

waiting for me to open the offices of Saint Martin.

Neither she nor her daughter were able to talk; they were too traumatised.

Later, I came to know that Mary was sexually abused by her 43 year old neighbour.

Mary is 2 years and half years old.
We took her to the hospital,
where the doctor confirmed the abuse and assisted with the first aid.

The reality is that the journey to heal Mary's body will be quite short
compared to the journey to heal her heart and the heart of her mother.

Esther was chosen to accompany them in their journey.
She has ten years of experience in this field
and a background of special counselling for such cases.
She stayed with Mary's mother for many hours that day,
and, the following day, she visited them at home.
She walked with Mary and her mother to the police station
and supported them during the difficult time in front of the magistrate.
Mary's mother told me that Esther called her every night before sleeping
and that this was the greatest consolation for them.

People who come to Saint Martin ask for a service.
Their first request is for something they need,
but in reality, their deepest demand is for someone they need.
Someone who knows that they are important,
someone ready to listen,
someone to welcome their brokenness,
someone to journey with them,
even if that journey is just a simple call before sleeping.

- PHOTO OF ALLAN

After 14 years in prison,
we have just welcomed Allan into our L'Arche community.
He was in need of clothes,
he was in need of food,
he was in need of shelter
but his deepest need was for someone to welcome him,
to accept him the way he is, to recognise his value and his capacity,
to be patient with his anguish and mental disorder.
The story of Allan is similar in a way
to a story we find in the gospel of Mark (Mk. 5,25-34).
In this story, Jesus understands the suffering of a woman's heart
through the suffering of her body.

- PHOTO OF THE PAINTING OF THE BLEEDING WOMAN

Before reading this gospel,
let me remind you of the three categories of people
considered impure or unclean at the time of Jesus:

the disabled,
the lepers,
and women in their period,
(or even worse, women who were continually bleeding for long time).

The Gospel tells us that there was a big crowd pressing all around Jesus,
such a crowd that he could hardly walk.
Hidden among that crowd was a woman.
She was a very weak woman since she had been bleeding for 12 years.
Of course she had to be hidden
because if her problem was known, she could have been stoned.
The Bible does not tell us much about her,
but we know enough about her culture to imagine her story.

At 12, she was already engaged.
At 13, the wedding was exactly how she dreamt it.
But a few months later, her bleeding started.
Her physical pain and her inability to conceive
were difficult to handle,
but not as difficult as handling the rejection from her community.
Her husband was also rejected for being associated with her.
He was patient for some time,
but eventually left her to start a new family with another woman.

Just imagine the pain of this woman:
rejected by everyone and abandoned by her husband.
She decided to go to Jesus.
So when Jesus was walking in the crowd,
she reached out and touched him.
Jesus felt her touch was a special one.
The touch of the poor is always special.
Jesus stopped to meet her.
When she told the truth about her story of suffering,
and revealed that she was unclean,
the crowd moved away from her,
but Jesus stepped closer and said: "my daughter".

In my catholic upbringing,
I was told that I have to be good to meet Jesus,
that I have to go for confession to be worthy of his love.
I was educated to think that I can come close to God
and become similar to him if I do not have weaknesses or fragilities,
but this woman shows me a different way.
She shows me that God's love is stronger than my weaknesses,
that my wounds do not repel Jesus; they attract him,
that God loves me not despite my weaknesses but because of them,

and that they are the very place where God is waiting for me.

In this gospel, the woman is healed by Jesus' acceptance and love,
but I wonder if the healing was mutual,
if Jesus was also healed in some way.
I do not really know,
but my life has taught me that love is always mutual.

Maybe it was in this moment that Jesus was liberated
from his culturally inherited bias against unclean women.
Maybe it was this woman who helped to further free Jesus
from the fear of the disabled, the lepers, and the women considered impure.

And maybe Jesus who is present in the poor
can also help us to be freed from our fears:
the fear of sickness and suffering,
fear of failure and loneliness,
fear of not being accepted,
fear of not being loved and not being wanted,
fear of being pushed down and not recognised,
fear of being unable to be a good father,
fear of being unable to be good mother,
fear of being inadequate to understand Allan or Paul.

In Saint Martin, if the healing is not mutual
we are going to experience a mere assistance, a simple answer to a need.
We are going to lose the best part.
And soon, we are going to get tired of service and give up.

PART THREE

From Division to Unity

The vision of Jesus is very simple:
every person is a child of God loved by the Father
and the last are the first because Jesus is in them.

I studied ecclesiology,
hoping to find the same vision of Jesus,
but I found a different vision, much more complicated.
They taught me what distinguished my church from others,
they taught me the value of the dogmas
which divide me from my brothers of others churches.
They insisted on the sacraments
as God's presence among us.

But they forgot to tell me
that the first sacrament is the poor,
and Jesus was never so clear:
I was hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison...
did you care for me?

This is the vision of the gospel,
a vision for all churches, a simple vision,
helping us to move
from seeing the poor as burdens to seeing them as gifts,
from seeing them as problems to seeing them as opportunities,
from seeing them as a disgrace to seeing them as a grace.
We need to join Jesus in saying, "*Blessed are the poor.*"

Allow me to tell you about a story which has changed my service in Saint Martin.
It happened many years ago when we were not as organised as we are now
and when we did not have a L'Arche community.

One Saturday afternoon, I was in my office when a couple came to visit me,
availing themselves to welcome a street child into their family.
I was happy to listen to their desire
and accompanied them to the competent office for the necessary procedure.

After a while, the person in charge of the disabled programme came
to present the case of Kamau, a child severely disabled (and probably HIV positive)
whose mother had died of AIDS the night before.
His nine brothers and sisters had been welcomed into different families
but no family had been found for Kamau
because it is difficult to ask a family to welcome Kamau.
I had no solution, so I offered to take the child with me for the weekend.
"On Monday," I told him,
"I will bring Kamau to Nairobi to the Sisters of Mother Teresa
[who had just opened an institution for children with disabilities]."

After this burst of generosity,
I realized that welcoming Kamau for the weekend
could be a real problem.
My Sunday was full of commitments and I had planned for a bit of rest.
Then, it occurred to me: Why not ask that young couple
to stay with him for the weekend?
I went to the office where I had accompanied them
and asked them if they could stay with Kamau for the weekend.

I expected a quick response,
but they asked for a few minutes to reflect on the offer.
I was disappointed.

If they were really ready to welcome a child from the street for a lifetime,
shouldn't they be ready to welcome Kamau for few days?
I went away unconvinced of their genuine readiness to welcome any child.

After a few minutes,
I went back and they told me that they had decided
not remain with Kamau for the weekend,
but to remain with him for the rest of their lives.
I was speechless.

In Africa, everyone trusts in God,
but do we trust in the community,
in the work that the Spirit does in people's hearts?
How can we work in the community without trust?
How is it possible that people who call themselves missionaries
are doing projects and initiatives
having more trust in the bank account of the donors
than in the hearts of their people?
How could I see Kamau first as a problem to be solved
instead of a solution to help me to solve our problems?

After one year, the same couple came to visit.
When I saw them enter my office, do you know what I thought?
I thought they were going to tell me that
it was a mistake to welcome Kamau in their home.
Instead, they came to express their gratitude.
The mother said,
"Kamau has been an angel sent to us by God."
In the seminary, where I received my formation,
I never met people who could inspire my heart like this couple.
These are my teachers, teaching me to see the poor as a gift.
But I am not so good at learning this lesson.
Actually, learning to recognise a grace in the poor
is the greatest challenge in my life.
I have been preaching about it for 15 years in Saint Martin
but it has not yet penetrated my heart.

Let me tell you what happened
the day before the feast of volunteers for Saint Martin's day.
I was talking with Thomas, one of our directors,
and some street children were assembling in the garden.
One of them tapped my shoulder and said, "Father, come and greet us."
I told him that I would come after I finished my conversation with Thomas.
But, when I finished talking,
I forgot to greet the children,
and went back to the hall to check if the chairs were well organised.

Just imagine what the street children felt when they saw me going away.

This is my reality.

If the street children cannot rely on me, after working with them for 15 years,
who can they rely on?

I have not been able to change in 15 years, will I change in the future?

This is the reason why Jesus said:

*"I bless you Father for hiding these things to the clever
and revealing them to the children..."*

Somehow this reality is hidden from us and revealed to the simple ones.

This is the reason why I wish to spend the rest of my life with the poor,
not because they need me,
but because I need them.

Without them, I will be lost.

Allow me to go back to Kamau's story.

A few months ago, I went to visit Kamau's family.

As we sat down for a cup of tea, Kamau's father told me
that Kamau had performed a miracle.

With tears in his eyes, his father told me
that he had not talked to his sister Lucy for twelve years
because of a disagreement about their inheritance.

Though they lived on the same land, they wouldn't exchange a word.

But Kamau, in his innocence, started to visit Lucy.

He would take a cup of porridge at Lucy's and bring the cup home,
proud to show the gift he had received.

At first, they dreaded taking back the cups,
but the more they did it, the closer they became.

"This was Kamau's miracle," his father said.

"Only Kamau could bring us back together."

This is the beautiful gift of the poor,

a gift which calls us together and promotes communion where there is division.

I've experienced what Kamau's father has experienced

not only with my family, but with my church.

And, just as in the story of Kamau,

the poor were the ones who helped to bring my church together with other churches.

In Kenya, there is a lot of division between churches.

Oftentimes, the only activity we share in common is that we all speak badly about one another.

It has gotten to the point where if the leader of any church calls for a meeting in Nyahururu,
the other leaders do not go.

In Saint Martin, we never planned to be ecumenical,

but the poor performed this miracle in our community
Today, if Saint Martin calls for a meeting of church leaders,
every church is glad and often proud to be participating.

How is it that the poor have the ability to do this?
I don't know, but I think it is the same mystery
that we find between a baby and a mother.
As a baby's weakness calls forth the best from his mother
so the poor's weakness can call forth the best from our communities.

Three years ago, there was a violent outbreak after Kenya's Presidential election.
In Nyahururu alone, we received 50 thousand refugees and we proposed to all the churches
an alternative solution to the usual camp for the refugees in the stadium.
Through the churches, we mobilised every single village
to welcome a small group of people according to their capacity.
We were convinced that we were offering to each village
an opportunity to welcome Jesus and to be transformed.

The media was very interested in our unique experience,
thinking that we had found a solution to a problem.
But we were just acting like the women of the resurrection,
moving in the darkness before daybreak,
responding to the plight of our loved ones,
and having faith, that with God's help,
people will emerge from their tombs
and resurrection will occur.
The result of this experiment was beautiful.
Together with the refugees, our communities lived an experience of solidarity,
they shared stories, leading them to understanding,
they provided listening, leading them to compassion,
they experienced healing, leading them to joy.

When I was young, I was a climber.
As a climber, I searched for God on the mountaintops.
When I grew older, I became a priest.
As a priest, I searched for God in the beautiful liturgy of my church
and in the fascinating ideas of theologians.
I am still grateful for all of this, but now,
beautiful ideas about God do not attract me
as much as the experience of his love.
The poor are gifted in bringing me this experience.

I wish to narrate one of these experiences of God's love
which I received from an angel called Jane.
Like Jesus, Jane reveals to me the reality of resurrection:

- PHOTO OF JANE

When the last post-election clashes started, Jane was a refugee from Eldoret town. She had no parents, and when I met her, she was starving to death. For the last three years, she has been in our L'Arche community. When I come back home from Saint Martin, she is always waiting to welcome me happily with her embrace full of joy and tenderness. Jane does not love me for what I do, or what I say or what I have. She does not know all these things. She loves me because it is me.

Sometimes I come from work a bit depressed because things did not go the way I wished them to go, or I am not happy with myself because I was in a meeting, and I was not patient with people. But Jane welcomes me back home and, without saying a word, says: "You might not be happy with the way you are, but I am happy and I love you the way you are!"

Only Jesus feels the same about me. Among the people I know, Jane is the person who is most similar to Jesus. I need to live with her.

- LAST REMARKS BY SAMUEL MUTAHI