

**Daily Readings from the Writings of Henri Nouwen**  
( [www.henrinouwen.org](http://www.henrinouwen.org) )

**1. Called out of Slavery**

The Church is the people of God. The Latin word for "church," ecclesia, comes from the Greek ek, which means "out," and kaleo, which means "to call." The Church is the people of God called out of slavery to freedom, sin to salvation, despair to hope, darkness to light, an existence centered on death to an existence focused on life. When we think of Church we have to think of a body of people, travelling together. We have to envision women, men, and children of all ages, races, and societies supporting one another on their long and often tiresome journeys to their final home.

**2. The Church, Spotless and Tainted**

The Church is holy and sinful, spotless and tainted. The Church is the bride of Christ, who washed her in cleansing water and took her to himself "with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless" (Ephesians 5:26-27). The Church too is a group of sinful, confused, anguished people constantly tempted by the powers of lust and greed and always entangled in rivalry and competition. When we say that the Church is a body, we refer not only to the holy and faultless body made Christ-like through baptism and Eucharist but also to the broken bodies of all the people who are its members. Only when we keep both these ways of thinking and speaking together can we live in the Church as true followers of Jesus.

**3. Believing in the Church**

The Church is an object of faith. In the Apostles' Creed we pray: "I believe in God, the Father, ... in Jesus Christ, his only Son... in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." We must believe in the Church! The Apostles' Creed does not say that the Church is an organization that helps us to believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No, we are called to believe in the Church with the same faith we believe in God. Often it seems harder to believe in the Church than to believe in God. But whenever we separate our belief in God from our belief in the Church, we become unbelievers. God has given us the Church as the place where God becomes God-with-us.

**4. Superabundant Grace**

Over the centuries the Church has done enough to make any critical person want to leave it. Its history of violent crusades, pogroms, power struggles, oppression, excommunications, executions, manipulation of people and ideas, and constantly recurring divisions is there for everyone to see and be appalled by. Can we believe that this is the same Church that carries in its center the Word of God and the sacraments of God's healing love? Can we trust that in the midst of all its human brokenness the Church presents the broken body of Christ to the world as food for eternal life? Can we acknowledge that where sin is abundant grace is superabundant, and that where promises are broken over and again God's promise stands unshaken? To believe is to answer yes to these questions.

#6a Pastoral Planning Tool Kit: Change is Painful... readings may accompany power point presentation or be used as follow up discussion starters for small groups.

## **5. The Garden of the Saints**

The Church is a very human organization but also the garden of God's grace. It is a place where great sanctity keeps blooming. Saints are people who make the living Christ visible to us in a special way. Some saints have given their lives in the service of Christ and his Church; others have spoken and written words that keep nurturing us; some have lived heroically in difficult situations; others have remained hidden in quiet lives of prayer and meditation; some were prophetic voices calling for renewal; others were spiritual strategists setting up large organizations or networks of people; some were healthy and strong; others were quite sick, and often anxious and insecure. But all of them in their own ways lived in the Church as in a garden where they heard the voice calling them the Beloved and where they found the courage to make Jesus the center of their lives.

## **6. Loving the Church**

Loving the Church often seems close to impossible. Still, we must keep reminding ourselves that all people in the Church - whether powerful or powerless, conservative or progressive, tolerant or fanatic - belong to that long line of witnesses moving through this valley of tears, singing songs of praise and thanksgiving, listening to the voice of their Lord, and eating together from the bread that keeps multiplying as it is shared. When we remember that, we may be able to say, "I love the Church, and I am glad to belong to it." Loving the Church is our sacred duty. Without a true love for the Church, we cannot live in it in joy and peace. And without a true love for the Church, we cannot call people to it.

## **7. Meeting Christ in the Church**

Loving the Church does not require romantic emotions. It requires the will to see the living Christ among his people and to love them as we want to love Christ himself. This is true not only for the "little" people - the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten - but also for the "big" people who exercise authority in the Church. To love the Church means to be willing to meet Jesus wherever we go in the Church. This love doesn't mean agreeing with or approving of everyone's ideas or behavior. On the contrary, it can call us to confront those who hide Christ from us. But whether we confront or affirm, criticize or praise, we can only become fruitful when our words and actions come from hearts that love the Church.

## **8. The Authority of Compassion**

The Church often wounds us deeply. People with religious authority often wound us by their words, attitudes, and demands. Precisely because our religion brings us in touch with the questions of life and death, our religious sensibilities can get hurt most easily. Ministers and priests seldom fully realize how a critical remark, a gesture of rejection, or an act of impatience can be remembered for life by those to whom it is directed. There is such an enormous hunger for meaning in life, for comfort and consolation, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for restoration and healing, that anyone who has any authority in the Church should constantly be reminded that the best word to characterize religious authority is *compassion*. Let's keep looking at Jesus whose authority was expressed in compassion.

## **9. Forgiving the Church**

When we have been wounded by the Church, our temptation is to reject it. But when we reject the Church it becomes very hard for us to keep in touch with the living Christ. When we say, "I love Jesus, but I hate the Church," we end up losing not only the Church but Jesus too. The challenge is to forgive the Church. This challenge is especially great because the Church seldom asks us for forgiveness, at least not officially. But the Church as an often fallible human organization needs our forgiveness, while the Church as the living Christ among us continues to offer us forgiveness. It is important to think about the Church not as "over there" but as a community of struggling, weak people of whom we are part and in whom we meet our Lord and Redeemer.

## **10. Our Spiritual Leaders**

The Church as the body of Christ has many faces. The Church prays and worships. It speaks words of instruction and healing, cleanses us from our sins, invites us to the table of the Lord, binds us together in a covenant of love, sends us out to minister, anoints us when we are sick or dying, and accompanies us in our search for meaning and our daily need for support. All these faces might not come to us from those we look up to as our leaders. But when we live our lives with a simple trust that Jesus comes to us in our Church, we will see the Church's ministry in places and in faces where we least expect it. If we truly love Jesus, Jesus will send us the people to give us what we most need. And they *are* our spiritual leaders.

## **11. One Body with Many Parts**

The Church is one body. Paul writes, "We were baptized into one body in a single Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). But this one body has many parts. As Paul says, "If they were all the same part, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one" (1 Corinthians 12:19). Not everyone can be everything. Often we expect one member of the body to fulfill a task that belongs to others. But the hand cannot be asked to see nor the eye to hear. Together we are Christ's body, each of us with a part to play in the whole (see 1 Corinthians 12:27). Let's be grateful for our limited but real part in the body.

## **12. Focusing on the Poor**

Like every human organization the Church is constantly in danger of corruption. How do we prevent corruption in the Church? The answer is clear: by focusing on the poor. The poor make the Church faithful to its vocation. When the Church is no longer a church for the poor, it loses its spiritual identity. It gets caught up in disagreements, jealousy, power games, and pettiness. Paul says, "God has composed the body so that greater dignity is given to the parts which were without it, and so that there may not be disagreements inside the body but each part may be equally concerned for all the others" (1 Corinthians 12:24-25). This is the true vision. The poor are given to the Church so that the Church as the body of Christ can be and remain a place of mutual concern, love, and peace.