

# Practical points for praying (part 2)

From *Making All Things New* by Henri Nouwen.

If you missed part 1 of “Practical points for praying,” [check that out here](#).



Henri Nouwen's books are widely read today by Protestants and Catholics alike. *The Wounded Healer*, *In the Name of Jesus*, *The Life of the Beloved*, and *The Way of the Heart* are just a few of the more widely recognized titles. After nearly two decades of teaching at the Menninger Foundation Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, and at the University of Notre Dame, Yale University and Harvard University, he went to share his life with mentally handicapped people at the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto, Canada. After a long period of declining energy, which he chronicled in his final book, *Sabbatical Journey*, he died in September 1996 from a sudden heart attack.

For the background to this post, please first read [Prayer—an inventor's perspective](#).

## **Write It in Black and White**

Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. Perhaps we are ready for an hour every day, an afternoon every week, a day every month, or a week every year. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity.

But we do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him. We may

have to write it in black and white in our daily calendar so that nobody else can take away this period of time. Then we will be able to say to our friends, neighbors, students, customers, clients, or patients, "I'm sorry, but I've already made an appointment at that time and it can't be changed."

### **Bombarded by Thousands of Thoughts**

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God's voice in us. In the beginning, during the first days, weeks, or even months, we may have the feeling that we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our minds.

One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life without much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting themselves. Later, as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw.

### **Tempted to Run Away**

It is clear that what matters is faithfulness to the discipline. In the beginning, solitude seems so contrary to our desires that we are constantly tempted to run away from it. One way of running away is daydreaming or simply falling asleep. But when we stick to our discipline, in the conviction that God is with us even when we do not yet hear him, we slowly discover that we do not want to miss our time alone

with God. Although we do not experience much satisfaction in our solitude, we realize that a day without solitude is less “spiritual” than a day with it.

### **The First Sign of Prayer**

Intuitively, we know that it is important to spend time in solitude. We even start looking forward to this strange period of uselessness. This desire for solitude is often the first sign of prayer, the first indication that the presence of God’s Spirit no longer remains unnoticed.

As we empty ourselves of our many worries, we come to know not only with our mind but also with our heart that we were never really alone, that God’s Spirit was with us all along. Thus we come to understand what Paul writes to the Romans, “Sufferings bring patience ... and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom. 5:4-6, JB).

### **The Way to Hope**

In solitude, we come to know the Spirit who has already been given to us. The pains and struggles we encounter in our solitude thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our sufferings are over, but on the real presence of God’s healing Spirit in the midst of these sufferings.

The discipline of solitude allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives, and allows us also to taste even now the beginnings of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.

The discipline of solitude, as I have described it here, is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life. It is a simple, though not easy, way to free us from the slavery of our occupations and preoccupations and to begin to

hear the voice that makes all things new.