

# ¡Gracias! - Henri Nouwen

## Quotes and portions

### Part 1 - Language School in Bolivia, October 18-January 1, 1981

The question: "Does God call me to live and work in Latin America in the years to come?" (ix)

reverse mission, option for the poor, an inner "imperative"

"I know that I must stay where I am called to be and suffer my feelings of powerlessness in solidarity with them." (xi)

A sense of call. A vocation. A sense of mission.

Had a sense of homecoming when he first went (3)

Note - if "preferential option for the poor" tries to say how the elite, or the rich, or all Christians, ought to show preferential love or concern or compassion for those in need, and a society's moral strength is based on how it treats its most vulnerable members, that defines "our" relation to "them." In reverse form, we must also strive to be the option that the poor prefer... that is, when one is in need, we must readily provide the services and expertise and availability that the poor select from a range of options. We have to provide the preferential option as well. We have to be the most attractive option.

illegally occupying barren land, "young towns", illegal land seizures (5)

"A true spirituality cannot be constructed, built, or put together; it has to be recognized in the daily life of people who search together to do God's will in the world." (6) - note, and, it must be selected, chosen, and *preferred* above other options

"not too long ago, the main task was seen as selling the pearls of good news to the poor and ignorant people. Now a radically new perspective dominates the Maryknoll activities: to search with the poor for the treasure hidden in the ground on which they stand. It is this shift from spiritual colonialism to solidarity in servanthood that explains the style of life, the way of speech, the kind of literature, and the overall mood that I have become part of during the last few days." (8).

"I pray that my stay in Bolivia will teach me much more than Spanish." (9)

### **Prayer**

"prayer and work with the poor belong together and that the need to pray had grown in me ever since I have been confronted with the oppression and exploitation of the poor in Peru and Bolivia." (10)

"Yes - indeed, just to pray for, with and among the poor spoke to me as a true missionary vocation. Wouldn't that be an authentic way of entering into solidarity with those who have

nothing to lose?

True prayer always includes becoming poor. When we pray we stand naked and vulnerable in front of Our Lord and show him our true condition. If one were to do this not just for oneself, but in the name of the thousands of surrounding poor people, wouldn't that be "mission" in the true sense of being sent into the world as Jesus himself was sent into the world? To lift up your hands to the Lord and show him the hungry children who play on the dusty streets, the tired women who carry their babies on their backs to the marketplace, the men who try to forget their misery and the homeless squatters, together with their laughter, friendly gestures, and gentle words - wouldn't that be true service? If God really exists, if he truly cares, if he never leaves his people alone, who is there to remind him of his promises? Who is there to cry out: "How long will you frown on your people's plea?? ... Turn again, we implore, look down from heaven and see. Visit this vine and protect it, the vine your right hand has planted.... Let your face shine on us, and we shall be saved" (PS. 80)? I feel that in a world rushing to the abyss, the need for calling God to the task, for challenging him to make his love felt among the poor, is more urgent than ever." (11)

Prayer is the ongoing cry of the incarnate Lord to the loving God. It is eternity in the midst of mortality, it is life among death, hope in the midst of despair, true promise surrounded by lies. Prayer brings love alive among us. So let us pray unceasingly. (12)

~

"the best I can do is probably not to give but to receive... Gratitude thus becomes the central virtue of a missionary" (16)

"I, therefore, think that for those who are pulled away from their familiar surroundings and brought into a strange land where they feel again like babies, the Lord offers a unique chance not only for personal conversion but also for an authentic ministry." (18)

"True missionaries are people who are hunting for the Divine treasure hidden in the heart of the people to whom they want to make the Good News known. They always expect to see the beauty and truth of God shining through those with whom they live and work.

The great paradox of ministry, therefore, is that we minister above all with our weakness, a weakness that invites us to receive from those to whom we go." (19)

(Foreign missionaries are frequently accused of political involvement because) "in general, they are the ones who work most closely with the poor, the homeless, and the jobless, because they are the only ones who can afford to do so. The local pastoral workers need to earn money to survive" (29)

*Nouwen quotes from a book:*

- 'We evolve into the images we carry in our minds. We become what we see. And in today's America, what most of us see is one hell of a lot of television....'

"When it is true that the image you carry in your mind can affect your physical, mental, and emotional life, then it becomes a crucial question as to which images we expose ourselves or allow ourselves to be exposed.... Prayer also has much to do with imagining.... The more we come to depend on the images offered to us by those who try to distract us, entertain us, use us for their purposes, and make us conform to the demands of a consumer society, the easier it is for us to lose our identity.... Latin America offers us the image of the suffering Christ." (30-31)

“There are many people who hate the Church because of its support for the poor.” (32) - note, In what world does this happen? The context he describes is very different from the one I am used to. The church is not usually hated for siding for the poor, but for its snobby morality, or hypocrisy.

“Mission work is not a task for individuals.” (43)

“The first and most important witness is to them who can say of us: ‘See how they love each other.’” (43)

“The basis of all ministry rests not in the moral life but in the mystical life.” (49)

“In a poor country the children always suffer the most.” (51) note - isn't this the same in a rich country? The sins and decadence of a rich country also impacts its most vulnerable members, the children, most intensely. And possibly, you could argue, in different forms - distance and isolation, inability to commit, detachment, etc...

Commentary - mentions the lack of expressions of affection between a groom and bride, and between married people (90).

## **Part 2 - Peru, January 1-March 29, 1982**

Describes a priest named “Bob” and his fellow workers “who see it as their main task to work with the people, to make them aware that the Gospel of Jesus Christ supports the poor in their struggle for basic human rights, and to join them in this struggle.” (100-101). Their understanding of ministry was simply “living with the people, as the people.” Many times Nouwen describes people working in this way, and aspires to it.

“The nearly exclusive emphasis on the tortured body of Christ strikes me as a perversion of the Good News into a morbid story that intimidates, frightens, and even subdues people but does not liberate them. I wonder how much of this has also been part of my own religious history, although more subtly. Maybe deep in my psyche I too know more about the deformed Jesus than about the risen Christ.” (106)

Says two most treasured items in the house are the television and the refrigerator.

Also, tells of persecution the family he lives with is suffering... enacted on them by false reports and accusations by family members.

“Preaching for very poor people is an activity that forces you to be honest with yourself.... ‘What do I really have to say to these people?’ I had the feeling that they had more to say to me than I to them.” (111)

Can we truly live with the poor? Although I live with them and share their life to some extent, I am far from poor. During the noon hour, I walk to the rectory in Ciudad de Dios and eat a good meal prepared by a good cook, and one day a week I go to the Maryknoll center house in Miraflores to take a shower, sleep in, and have a day of relaxation.

So my living with the poor hardly makes me poor. Should it be different? Some say yes, some say no. Some feel that to be a priest for the poor, you should be no different from them, others say that such is not realistic or even authentic.

I have been here only one week, and thus am unable to have an opinion, but I know one thing: right now I would be physically, mentally, and spiritually unable to survive without the opportunity to break away from it all once in awhile. All the functions of life, which previously hardly required attention, are complicated and time-consuming operations here: washing, cooking, writing, cleaning, and so on. The winds cover everything with thick layers of dust; water has to be hauled up in buckets from below and boiled to be drinkable; there is seldom a moment of privacy, with kids walking in and out all the time, and the thousands of loud sounds make silence a faraway dream. I love living here, but I am also glad that I can escape it for two hours a day and for one day a week. Living here not only makes me aware that I have never been poor, but also that my whole way of being, thinking, feeling, and acting is molded by a culture radically different from the one I live in now. I am surrounded by so many safety systems that I could not be allowed to become truly poor. If I were to become seriously ill, I would be sent back to the United States and given the best possible treatment. As soon as my life or health were really threatened, I would have many people around me willing to protect me.

At this moment, I feel that a certain realism is necessary. I am not poor as my neighbors are. I will never be and will not ever be allowed to be by those who sent me here. I have to accept my own history and live out my vocation, without denying that history. On the other hand, I realize that the way of Christ is a self-emptying way. What that precisely means in my own concrete life will probably remain a lifelong question.

I am writing all this from my comfortable room in the center house in Miraflores, where I have a day off. I enjoyed my shower, I am glad to receive mail and have a dust-free desk on which to answer it, and I look forward to reading a book, seeing a movie, and talking to friends about religion, politics, and "home." But I am also happy that tomorrow I can return to Pablito, Johnny, and Maria and play with them in Pamplona Alta.

(115-116)

"It suddenly hit me how crucial it is for the poor to organize themselves into supportive communities. But for people who struggle day after day just to survive, little energy remains to build these necessary networks." (118)

"Good medical care is out of the reach of the poor, and many poor people do not even try to find it. Often they do not have the time, the opportunity, or the transportation to go to a good hospital; and frequently they cannot pay for the medicines the doctors prescribe." (118)

"If anything has affected me deeply since I have been living in Pamplona Alta, it has been the children.... The children always challenge me to live in the present.... Whereas in the past coming home meant time to study, to write letters, and to prepare for classes, it now first of all means time to play....

"I wondered how the poverty, the lack of good food and good housing would affect me; I was afraid of becoming depressed by the misery I would see. But God showed me something else first: affectionate, open and playful children who are telling me about love and life in ways no book was ever able to do. I now realize that only when I can enter with the children into their joy will I be able to enter also with them into their poverty and pain. God obviously wants me to walk into the world of suffering with a little child on each hand."

(123)

"Dust is probably my greatest physical problem here." (124)

"The most important question for me is not, "How do I touch people?" but, "How do I live the word I am speaking?" In Jesus, no division existed between his words and his actions, between what he said and what he did. Jesus' words were his action, his words were events.

They not only spoke about changes, cures, new life, but they actually created them. In this sense, Jesus is truly the Word made flesh; in that Word all is created and by that Word all is recreated.

“Saintliness means living without division between word and action. If I would truly live in my own life the word I am speaking, my spoken words would become actions, and miracles would happen whenever I opened my mouth. The Gospel of today thus confronts me not so much with a question about pastoral tactics or strategy, but with an invitation to deep personal conversion.” (125)

“The nights in Pamplona Alta are filled with loud sounds.” (127)

deep depression / possession (130-131)

“Ministry means first of all searching for God where people are lost, confused, broken, and poor.” (135)

On the topic of the charismatic movement (Neo-Pentecostalism), which appeals primarily to the middle- and upper-class youth. Participants in the discussion “didn’t hesitate to say that prayer, as seen and practiced in many charismatic groups, was not Christian prayer since it does not come from nor lead to the *lucha* for the liberation of God’s people.” Nouwen disagrees, and is uncomfortable with the generalization. He responds: “I even have the feeling that those who want to be active in this struggle for a freedom for a lifetime will need an increasingly strong and personal experience of the presence of the Spirit of God in their lives.” (136-137)

“We came to the conclusion that every Christian is called to a radical commitment to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, and that for the Latin American Christian this means a compassionate struggle to liberate the poor. Everyone stressed that this formulation was inadequate and did not cover the whole of a Christian spirituality for Latin America, but nobody denied that this formulation captured the main thrust of the “New Church.” (137-138)

“Lucha... [is a word] used to counteract a passive and fatalistic stance towards the misery of the masses and to stress the urgency of an active - even aggressive - involvement in the war against poverty, oppression, and exploitation.” (138)

143 - describes the characteristics of a servant working among the incarcerated... what it takes to do so

145 - Begins to describe “the dream” - a small group of dedicated people, in a *pueblo joven*, that practice the disciplines of prayer and meditation and become a center of hope for the neighborhood. Missionary workers now are “dedicated and generous people involved in different projects,” but “busy, distracted, pressured, and restless, and often very tired.... How would it be if, in the midst of the very poor, a small group of men and women created a space for people to celebrate God’s presence?... Maybe it’s just a romantic dream, but it is a dream that continues to press itself on me.” (145)

“Gratitude is one of the most visible characteristics of the poor I have come to know.” (146)

“The poor are a eucharistic people, people who know to say thanks to God, to life, to each other. They may not come to Mass, they may not participate in many church celebrations. But in their hearts they are deeply religious, because for them all of life is a long fiesta with God.” (147)  
Note: This is true. Skeptically, cynically, though, you also have to watch for the problem of social

capital (status via economy of gifts) and the problem of catering to influential guests.

“More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time and the freedom to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it is not as simple as it seems. My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets.” (147-148)

Continues describing “the dream”. He repeats this often, and I’ve felt the same desire. Why don’t we see it happen? “The core of this idea is that of living among the people to learn from them. This might sound romantic and sentimental, but in fact it requires discipline to allow the people to become our teachers.... It would be a ministry of presence, but an active, articulate, considered presence.” (148) In Villa Salvador, a “young city” (informal settlement, slum) of 300,000 people outside of Lima, he finds two priests living there who “considered the simple act of staying with the people the core of their ministry” (149).

“I realized that the question of where to live and what to do is really insignificant compared to the question of how to keep the eyes of my heart focused on the Lord.... There is not such a thing as the right place or the right job. I can be happy and unhappy in all situations. I am sure of it, because I have been” (151) - Note: however, what about the idea of a “calling?” A “delight?”

“Liberation theologians do not think themselves into a new way of living, but live themselves into a new way of thinking” (159).

Quoting another priest, “Living with the poor not only makes you see the good more clearly, but the evil as well”.... “One of the temptations of upper-middle-class life is to create large gray areas between good and evil. Wealth takes away the sharp edges of our moral sensitivities and allows a comfortable confusion about sin and virtue. The difference between rich and poor is not that the rich sin more than the poor, but that the rich find it easier to call sin a virtue. When the poor sin, they call it sin; when they see holiness, they identify it as such. This intuitive clarity is often absent from the wealthy, and that absence easily leads to the atrophy of the moral sense.” It helps you to “see evil in sharper, clearer ways.” (160) Note - when one is in need of clarity, or moral distinction, spending time in these contexts helps remove ambiguity and give a sense of urgency to the need for working toward a better world.

Describes “missioners” what they do and how they serve, leaving what is familiar and serving in a challenging context. Believes “the two most damaging motives in the makeup of missioners seem to be guilt and the desire to save.” (161) “The great challenge, however, is to live and work out of gratitude.... The human missionary task is to give visibility to the Divine work in the midst of our daily existence....” Humility is the Christian virtue that “opens our eyes for the presence of God on the earth and allows us to live grateful lives. The poor themselves are the first to help us recognize true humility and gratitude. They can make a receptive missioner a truly happy person.” (162)

167 - Describes the History of the Theology/Practice of Liberation

“Two Churches are gradually developing in Peru.... On the one side is the Church that speaks primarily about God, with little reference to the daily reality in which the people live; on the other

side is the Church that speaks primarily about the struggle of the people for freedom, with little reference to the Divine mysteries to which this struggle points.... I suddenly feel a deep pain. I would never feel at home any more in this traditional Church, but will I ever in the Church of the *lucha*?" (170)

"Affection, tenderness, solitude are not to be rejected by those who struggle for the freedom of the people.... Love for the people is essential for a true Christian revolution." (172)

'New fighters' in the struggle for liberation often are tense, harsh, and unfeeling, but... those who have been in the struggle for a long time are gentle, caring, and affectionate people who have been able to integrate the most personal with the most social. Gustavo [Gutiérrez] himself is certainly an 'old fighter'. When I look at this little man, Gustavo, and think about the tall Ronald Reagan, I see David standing before Goliath again with no more weapon than a little stone, called *A Theology of Liberation*." (172, 175)

"I will be at home here only when I experience my stay as a vocation, a call from God, and from the people." (174)

Describes hostility and suspicion between Catholic and Protestant church, and is convinced of the need for better Ecumenism/collaboration. (181)

Repeats a condensed version of "the dream" - to live among the people, pray with and for them, visit them in their homes, offer days of retreat and recollection, and gradually help them articulate their own spiritual gifts (181). It is a lack of imagination that prevents us from incorporating this "dream" into something larger. Or perhaps guilt. Not everyone can do it. But some can. And feel "called" to it.

"I look forward to going home tomorrow, to sitting in a comfortable airplane. I like to be welcomed home by friends. I look forward to being back again in my cozy apartment, with my books, my paintings, and my plants. I like showers with hot water, faucets with water you can drink, washing machines that work, and lamps that keep burning. I like cleanliness. But is it there that I will find God?" (184)

"Something has happened to me. I sit here and wonder if going north still means going home." (185)

"After many centuries of missionary work during which we, the people of the north, tried to give them, the people of the south, what we felt they needed, we have now come to realize that our very first vocation is to receive their gifts to us and say thanks." Make our lives an unceasing act of gratitude. (188)