

be with me when I am not in control, when I feel like crying? Is there anybody who can hold me and give me a sense of belonging?" Feeling irrelevant is a much more general experience than we might think when we look at our seemingly self-confident society. Medical technology and the tragic increase in abortions may radically diminish the number of mentally handicapped people in our society, but it is already becoming apparent that more and more people are suffering from profound moral and spiritual handicaps without having any idea of where to look for healing.

It is here that the need for a new Christian leadership becomes clear. The leader of the future will be the one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there.

## *The Question: "Do You Love Me?"*

*B*efore Jesus commissioned Peter to be a shepherd he asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" He asked him again, "Do you love me?" And a third time he asked, "Do you love me?" We have to hear that question as being central to all of our Christian ministry because it is the question that can allow us to be, at the same time, irrelevant and truly self-confident.

Look at Jesus. The world did not pay any attention to him. He was crucified and put away. His message of love was rejected by a world in search of power, efficiency, and control. But there he was, appearing with wounds in his glorified body to a few friends who had eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand. This rejected, unknown, wounded Jesus simply asked, "Do you love

me, do you really love me?" He whose only concern had been to announce the unconditional love of God had only one question to ask, "Do you love me?"

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope.

The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, "a heart of flesh," in Jesus. Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begin to invade the human soul this is not something that comes from God. This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits. This unconditional and unlimited love is what the evangelist John calls God's first love. "Let us love," he says, "because God loved us first" (1 John 4:19). The love that often leaves us doubtful, frustrated, angry, and resentful is the second love, that is to say, the affirmation, affection, sympathy, encouragement, and support that we receive from our parents, teachers, spouses, and friends. We all know how limited, broken, and very fragile

that love is. Behind the many expressions of this second love there is always the chance of rejection, withdrawal, punishment, blackmail, violence, and even hatred. Many contemporary movies and plays portray the ambiguities and ambivalences of human relationships, and there are no friendships, marriages, or communities in which the strains and stresses of the second love are not keenly felt. Often it seems that beneath the pleasantries of daily life there are many gaping wounds that carry such names as: abandonment, betrayal, rejection, rupture, and loss. These are all the shadow side of the second love and reveal the darkness that never completely leaves the human heart.

The radical good news is that the second love is only a broken reflection of the first love and that the first love is offered to us by a God in whom there are no shadows. Jesus' heart is the incarnation of the shadow-free first love of God. From his heart flow

streams of living water. He cries out in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink" (John 8:37). "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28, 29).

From that heart come the words, "Do you love me?" Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing. The knowledge of Jesus' heart is a knowledge of the heart. And when we live in the world with that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life and hope wherever we go. The desire to be relevant and successful will gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, "You are loved. There is no reason to be afraid. In love God created your

inmost self and knit you together in your mother's womb" (see Psalm 139:13).

## *The Discipline: Contemplative Prayer*

To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God's first love, we have to be mystics. A mystic is a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God's first love.

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" It is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strang-

ers to our own and God's heart. Contemplative prayer keeps us home, rooted and safe, even when we are on the road, moving from place to place, and often surrounded by sounds of violence and war. Contemplative prayer deepens in us the knowledge that we are already free, that we have already found a place to dwell, that we already belong to God, even though everything and everyone around us keeps suggesting the opposite.

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch

HENRI J.M.  
NOUWEN

*In the Name of*  
**Jesus**

Reflections on Christian Leadership