

Christ in the desert

Quiet Day Resources 2



Sacred texts for meditation & reflection

Christ's humility

Philippians 2: 5-11 (NRSV)
(an ancient Christian hymn)

Let the same mind be in you
that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of
death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the
earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 7, 13-14

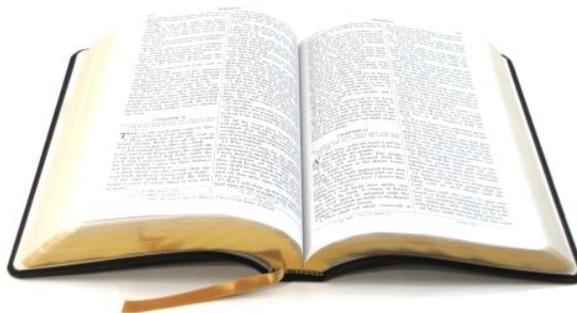
“Jesus said: ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.’”

Matthew 23:10-12

Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Isaiah 57:15

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”



From the desert mothers and fathers

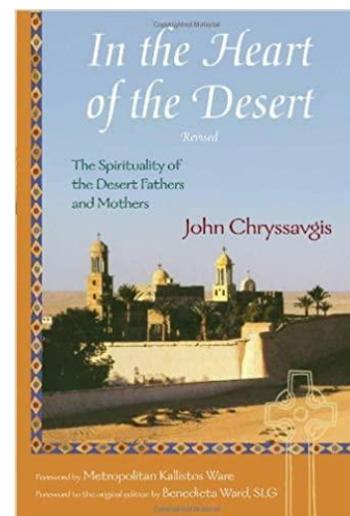
Amma Theodora said: “Let us strive to enter by the narrow gate. Just as the trees, if they have not stood before the winter’s storms cannot bear fruit, so it is with us; this present age is a storm and it is only through many trials and temptations that we can obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.”
(Theodora 2)

“If a trial comes upon you in the place where you live, do not leave that place when the trial comes. Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is there ahead of you. So stay until the trial is over, so that if you do end up leaving, no offence will be caused, and you will not bring distress to others who live in the same neighbourhood.”
(Anonymous 68)

Amma Theodora told this story: “There was a monk, who, because of the great number of his temptations said, ‘I will go away from here.’ As he was putting on his sandals, he saw another man who was also putting on his sandals and this other monk said to him, ‘Is it on my account you are going away? Because I go before you wherever you are going.’”
(Theodora 7)

From John Chryssavgis, *In the heart of the desert* (2008) , p.104.

“If God is right there, in the midst of our struggle, then our aim is to stay there. We are to remain in the cell, to stay on the road, not to forego the journey or forget the darkness. It is all too easy for us to overlook the importance of struggle, preferring instead to secure peace and rest, or presuming to reach the stage of love prematurely. It is always easier to allow things to pass by, to go on without examination and effort. Yet, struggling means living. It is a way of fully living life and not merely observing it... The Desert Fathers and Mothers speak to us with authority, because they are in fact our fellow travellers. They never claim to have arrived, they never indicate having completed the journey.”



From: Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. Copyright © 1989. All rights reserved. Used with permission of The Crossroad Publishing Company.

My movement from Harvard to L'Arche made me aware in a new way how much my own thinking about Christian leadership had been affected by the desire to be relevant, the desire for popularity, and the desire for power. Too often, I looked at being relevant, popular and powerful as ingredients of an effective ministry. The truth, however, is that these are not vocations, but temptations.

Jesus asks us to move from concern for relevance to a life of prayer, from worries about popularity to communal and mutual ministry, and from a leadership built on power to a leadership in which we critically discern where God is leading us and our people.

The Temptation to be Relevant

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, "Don't give him meat, he doesn't eat meat, he's a Presbyterian."²

Not able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations could no longer be counted on.

This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.

I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's Word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.

Jesus' first temptation was to be relevant: to turn stones into bread. Oh, how I wished I could do that! Are we not called to do something that makes people realize that we do make a difference in their lives? Aren't we called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and alleviate the suffering of the poor? Jesus was faced with the same questions, but when he was asked to prove his power as the Son of God by the relevant behavior of turning stones into bread, he clung to his mission to proclaim the word and said, "Human beings live not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."²

Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world. It is here that the need for a new Christian leadership becomes clear. The leader of the future will be one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deeper solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and bring the light of Jesus there.

Addressing the Temptation through 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—the unconditional and unlimited love that John reveals when he says "Let us love because God first loved us"³ (1 John 4:19)—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, "Do you love me?"⁴ "Do you love me? Do you love me?"⁵ It is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer, we keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own and God's heart. Contemplative prayer keeps us home, rooted and safe, even when we are on the road.

It is not enough for (Christian leaders) 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 God's incarnate Word and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?

The Temptation to be Spectacular

Let me tell you about another experience that came out of my move from Harvard to L'Arche. It was the experience of shared ministry. I was educated in a seminary that made me believe that ministry was essentially an individual affair. I had to be well-trained and well-formed, and after six years of training and formation, I was considered well-equipped to

preach, administer the sacraments, counsel, and run a parish. I was made to feel like a man sent on a long, long hike with a huge backpack containing all the things necessary to help the people I would meet on the road. Questions had answers, problems had solutions and pains had their medicines. Just be sure that you know with which one of the three you are dealing.

Over the years I realized that things were not as simple as that, but my basic individualistic approach to ministry did not change. When I became a teacher I was even more encouraged to do my own thing. I could choose my own subject, my own method, and sometimes, even my own students. Nobody would even question my way of doing things. And when I left the classroom, I was completely free to do whatever I saw fit. After all, everyone has the right to live his private life!

When I went to L'Arche, however, this individualism was radically challenged. Living in a community with very wounded people, I came to see that I had lived most of my life as a tightrope artist trying to walk on a high, thin cable from one tower to the other, always waiting for the applause when I had not fallen off and broken my leg.

The second temptation to which Jesus was exposed was precisely the temptation to do something spectacular, something that could win him great applause. "Throw yourself from the parapet of the temple and let the angels catch you and carry you in their arms." But Jesus refused to be a stunt man. He did not come to prove himself. He did not come to walk on hot coals, swallow fire, or put his hand in the lion's mouth to demonstrate that he had something worthwhile to say. "Don't put the Lord your God to the test," he said.

When you look at today's Church, it is easy to see the prevalence of individualism among ministers and priests. Not too many of us have a vast repertoire of skills to be proud of, but most of us feel that if we have anything at all to show, it is something that we have to do solo. You could say that many of us feel like failed tightrope walkers who discovered that we do not have the power to draw thousands of people, that we could not make many conversions—that we were not as popular with the youth, the young adults, or the elderly as we had hoped, and that we were not as able to respond to the needs of our people as we had expected. But most of us still feel that, ideally, we should have been able to do it all and do it successfully. Stardom and individual heroism, which are such obvious aspects of our competitive society, are not at all alien to the Church. There too the dominant image is that of the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone.

Addressing the Temptation through Confession and Forgiveness

Having said this, we are faced with the question: What discipline is required for the future leader to overcome the temptation of individual heroism? I would like to propose the discipline of confession and forgiveness. Just as future leaders must be mystics deeply

steeped in contemplative prayer, so also must they be persons always willing to confess their own brokenness and ask for forgiveness from those to whom they minister.

(But) often they seem to say, “What if my people knew how I really feel, what I think and daydream about, and where my mind wanders when I am sitting by myself in my study?” It is precisely the men and women who are dedicated to spiritual leadership who are easily subject to very raw carnality. The reason for this is that they do not know how to live the truth of the Incarnation. They separate themselves from their own concrete community, try to deal with their needs by ignoring them or satisfying them in distant or anonymous places, and then experience an increasing split between their own most private inner world and the good news they announce. When spirituality becomes spiritualization, life in the body becomes carnality.

Confession and forgiveness are exactly the disciplines by which spiritualization and carnality can be avoided and true incarnation lives. Through confession, the dark powers are taken out of their carnal isolation, brought into the light and made visible to the community. Through forgiveness they are disarmed and dispelled and a new integration between body and spirit is made possible.

All of this does not mean that (leaders) must, explicitly, bring their own sins and failures into their daily ministries. That would be unhealthy and imprudent and not at all a form of servant leadership. What it means is that (leaders) are also called to be full members of their communities, are accountable to them and need their full affection and support, and are called to minister their whole being, including their wounded selves.

The Temptation to be Powerful

Let me tell you about a third experience connected with my move from Harvard to L’Arche. It was clearly a move from leading to being led. Somehow I had come to believe that growing older and more mature meant that I would be increasingly able to offer leadership. In fact, I had grown more self-confident over the years. I felt I knew something and had the ability to express it and be heard. In that sense I felt more and more in control.

But when I entered my community with mentally handicapped people and their assistants, all controls fell apart and I came to realize that every hour, day, and month was full of surprises—often surprises I was least prepared for.

Without realizing it, the people I came to live with made me aware of the extent to which my leadership was still a desire to control complex situations, confused emotions, and anxious minds. It took me a long time to feel safe in this unpredictable climate, and I still have moments in which I clamp down and tell everyone to shut up, get in line, listen to me, and believe in what I say. But I am also getting in touch with the mystery that leadership, for a large part, means to be led.

You all know what the third temptation of Jesus was. It was the temptation of power. “I will give you all the kingdoms of this world in their splendor,” the demon said to Jesus. When I ask myself the main reason for so many people having left the Church during the past decades in France, Germany, Holland, and also in Canada and America, the word “power” easily comes to mind. One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation to power—political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power—even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are.

What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.

Addressing the Temptation through Theological Reflection

I propose here the discipline of strenuous theological reflection. Just as prayer keeps us connected with the first love and just as confession and forgiveness keep our ministry communal and mutual, so strenuous theological reflection will allow us to discern critically where we are being led.

Most Christian leaders today raise psychological or sociological questions even though they frame them in scriptural terms. Real theological thinking, which is thinking with the mind of Christ, is hard to find in the practice of ministry. Without solid theological reflection, future leaders will be little more than pseudo-psychologist, pseudo-sociologist, pseudo-social works. They will think of themselves as enablers, facilitators, role models, father or mother figures, big brothers or big sisters, and so on, and thus join the countless men and women who make a living by trying to help their fellow human beings to cope with the stresses and strains of everyday living.

But that has little to do with Christian leadership because the Christian leader thinks, speaks and acts in the name of Jesus, who came to free humanity from the power of death and open the way to eternal life.

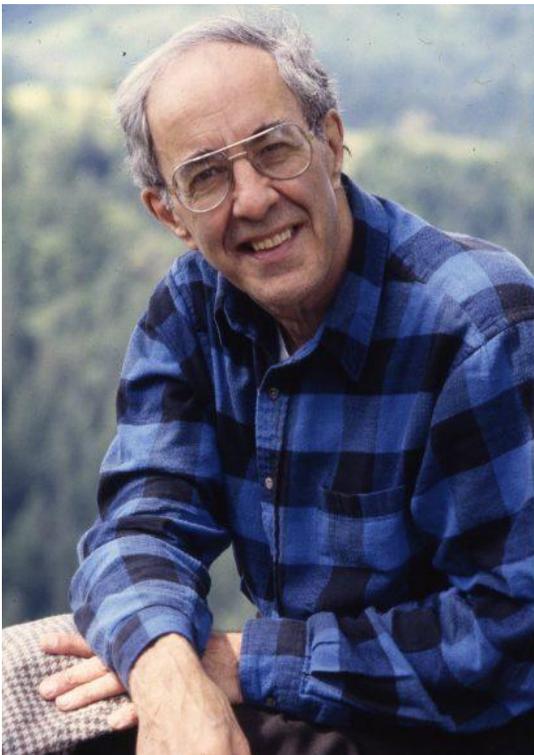
Theological reflection is reflecting on the painful and joyful realities of every day with the mind of Jesus and thereby raising human consciousness to the knowledge of God’s gentle guidance. This is a hard discipline since God’s presence is often a hidden presence, a presence that needs to be discovered. The loud, boisterous noises of the world make us

deaf to the soft, gentle, and loving voice of God. A Christian leader is called to help people hear that voice and so be comforted and consoled.

Thinking about the future of Christian leadership, I am convinced that it needs to be a theological leadership. This cannot just be an intellectual training. It requires deep spiritual formation involving the whole person—body, mind, and heart. Everything in our competitive and ambitious world militates against it. But to the degree that such formation is being sought for and realized, there is hope.”

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From <http://www.christianity9to5.org/three-temptations-of-a-christian-leader/>



Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was a Dutch-born Catholic priest whose 40 books have been widely read by Catholics and Protestants alike.

In his later years, his ministry shifted from teaching ivy-leaguers at Harvard to pastoring at Daybreak, one of the L’Arche communities for mentally handicapped people. Soon after that transition, Fr. Nouwen was invited to give a series of talks about Christian leadership to a group of clergy, talks that were eventually published under the title *In the Name of Jesus*.

This article shares the essence of Nouwen’s ideas from that book.