

Eternal Seasons: A Liturgical Journey With Henri J. M. Nouwen Michael Ford, editor

Leading a Spiritual Book Discussion

Congratulations! Leading a book discussion can be a rewarding experience. This guide contains some general hints on leading a successful group as well as questions and themes specific to this book. A book discussion of a spirituality title is more than a discussion of a book. It's about personal growth in a faith journey. It's about fostering community in faith. It's about members engaging with the book in a way that enlightens their faith life.

Good preparation will help the discussion flow smoothly. Consider having one member (or all) investigate the Web sites included here to share more information about the author and his journey. Nouwen drew spiritual inspiration from Thomas Merton, Brother Roger Schulz of Taize, and the L'Arche Daybreak community. Members may wish to learn more about these influences as you delve deeper into Nouwen's journey. Doing some research online or at a good library can enrich your discussions.

In advance of the meeting, choose some questions to present to the group; some you may choose to distribute before the meeting to allow time for reflection and preparation, others will lend themselves to more spontaneous discussion.

Be attentive to your group members and group dynamics. Don't be afraid to change your original plan if a particularly lively and fruitful discussion develops, taking your discussion in an unplanned direction. However, if you feel that the discussion has gone off track in an unproductive way, use questions you have prepared to refocus the discussion.

As the facilitator, be sure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion. If some members of your group continue to dominate the discussions, it can help to intervene by asking silent members a direct, open-ended question ("What's your response to that?").

Format of the Discussion

As a group, decide how you will cover this book. It is best to discuss the sections during the appropriate season of the liturgical year; however, they can be reflected upon sequentially over the course of a few meetings. If time does allow a more leisurely approach, consider integrating the discussion of this book with the corresponding scripture readings for the season.

Encourage members to journal as they read and reflect. *Eternal Seasons* is meant to bring about spiritual growth in action, which is facilitated by regular reflection, journaling, discussion, and, most importantly, faith-filled action.

Suggested Questions for Reflection and Discussion

As with any reading group guide, this is only a guide, and should be modified to fit your group's preferences. Some options include:

- Choose some questions to give to all members of the group in advance of reading the book. Have them reflect on these questions and respond to them prior to reading the book, then again after reading. This can help members see concretely their own journey through the book.
- Choose questions to distribute to participants for reflection after reading, asking them to come prepared to discuss them.
- Ask members to choose a question or topic that resonates with them. Have them present that question or topic to the group, explaining why they choose their particular topic.
- Assign different questions or topics to each member to present to the group.
- Begin your discussion by asking about each member's reading experience—no formal preparation necessary.

No matter what options you choose, ask members to mark passages that seem especially meaningful or challenging to them. At your meeting, ask participants to read them aloud to the group. This is one of the best ways to draw members into the discussion. Consider having members solicit responses to the passage and perhaps lead that part of the discussion.

Allow time for socializing or snacks if your group so chooses, but remember to leave plenty of time for discussion of the book.

Initial Questions

While reading each season's selections, keep in mind such questions as:

- How does this reading shed a new light on my journey?
- How does Nouwen call me to grow or change during this part of the Church year?
- What inspiration and hope do I find in Nouwen's depictions of the feast days?

These are good starting points to draw members personally into the discussion. Encourage them to come prepared with written or unwritten responses to the above questions.

In several reflections Nouwen explains how an icon or stained glass window has helped him to see anew.

- What role, if any, do icons and religious art play in your faith?
- What is the artistic inspiration for your spiritual journey?
- What characteristics (i.e., form, subject, colors, brushstrokes, etc.) of a piece of art give it spiritual meaning in your eyes?

Nouwen writes that great saints “are our guides. Not to be imitated but to help us live our lives just as authentically as they lived theirs” (19).

- How do you find this view of saints? Which saint(s) helps you to live authentically?
- As you read the book, what other inspiration/advice does Nouwen give on leading an authentic life?

Nouwen reveals himself fully to us, showing us both his struggles and joys throughout the reflections. That such a holy man of God remained plagued with human frailties and struggled to find that elusive inner peace can give us hope for our journey.

- Do his struggles sound authentic to you?
- Which struggles do you share?
- Do you find consolation or more despair?
- What brings about conversion?
- Are you willing to listen to God within? (73)
- Which reflection on a saint or feast day surprised you?
- Which one resonated with your experience?

Look for the following themes throughout: connection, living in the present, compassion, belonging, God within, humility, surrender, calling, Christian unity, suffering, solidarity, fragility, light in the darkness, faith amidst struggles, divine love.

- What other themes do you find?

Advent:

Advent is a time of waiting.

- Complete the sentence “Waiting is . . .”

In these reflections Nouwen defines various aspects of waiting.

- Are they different than your descriptions?
- How do we wait for both the hoped for and the feared, and what does that say about our faith journey?
- As a society, how has our fear inhibited our ability to wait in joy? (30)

Nouwen writes: “By looking back in meditation, I can look forward in expectation. By reflection, I can project; by conserving the memory of Christ's birth, I can progress to the fulfillment of his Kingdom” (33).

- How does this affect our ability to wait?

- How does it affect our actions in faith?

Christmas:

Reflect on the theme of divine fragility as seen in these reflections. Nouwen himself experienced great discomfort in facing the unfamiliar, yet he discovered the divine there.

- How does this challenge us or comfort us?
- Contemplate the mystery of the incarnation, God made flesh. Where, or in whom, do you see God, and where do your eyes yet need to be opened?
- What facilitates your contemplation and celebration of this mystery?

“To act in the Name of Jesus therefore means to act from the place where we are united with Jesus in love” (55).

- How does acting out of love make a difference in your life?

Nouwen discusses the icon of the Virgin of Vladimir (55-56).

- Is there an icon or painting of the Virgin Mary that has a special meaning to you?
- How is it different to be truly seen than to be looked at?

Epiphany:

“Every human being is called by Jesus in a unique way” (64).

- How are you called?
- What struggles do you face in continually choosing to accept your calling?
- What is it to belong?
- What role does community play and what role does isolation play?

On page 66 Nouwen describes the root meanings of the expression ascribed to Jesus “moved with compassion.”

- What does this type of compassion mean for our journey to follow Christ and love as he loved?
- Consider what it takes to be made healthy and whole in the Lord.

Lent:

As Nouwen writes, we must go through the darkness to fully celebrate the light of the resurrection (83).

- How do you participate in the death of the Lord in Lent?
- What fruits does that participation bear in your faith journey?

Nouwen says that we can gradually realize that “to pray is to live” (87).

- How is that different than “to live is to pray?”

Forgiveness plays a key role in Lent, and Nouwen describes “stepping over” as “the authentic discipline of forgiveness” (87). As the transgressor, we must accept that forgiveness from God (91).

- How and what do we surrender when forgiving and being forgiven?

Holy Week:

Embracing the cross:

- What does this mean for you?
- Relate the waiting in Holy Week to the waiting in advent.

In the light of your daily life reflect on the following: “From the moment Jesus is handed over, his passion begins, and through his passion he fulfills his vocation . . . the truth is that my passion is a much greater part of my life than my action. Not to recognize this is self-deception and not to embrace my passion with love is self-rejection” (103).

Imagine yourself on the Holy Week journey with Christ.

- What emotions do you experience?
- Imagine the suffering of all bound up with the suffering of Christ, as Nouwen envisaged one Good Friday (112).

Easter:

Nouwen writes: “As we claim our faith in the resurrection of the body, we come to see that the resurrection is not simply an event after death but a reality of everyday life” (121).

- Does this relate to the experience of conversion discussed elsewhere?
- Do we continue to see it?
- Are there any experiences in our lives that give us a hint of the new life that has been promised us?” (124).
- How does the ecstasy of Easter relate to the joy of Christmas?
- What is your experience of being held in God's hands?

Pentecost:

Nouwen recounts his discovery, through a Russian icon, of how Pentecost reveals the God within creating a community of faith, which leads to the liberation of the world (141).

- How do you see this process?
- What aspect of Eucharist speaks to you? (Corpus Christi p. 145-48).

Transfiguration:

- Discuss the role of trust and faith.
- What grace-filled experiences do you want to hold onto forever?

- How have you been able (or not) to integrate those experiences into your everyday spirituality?

Nouwen writes about transcendence and direct knowledge of God, which leads to transformation.

- What is your experience of this, if any?
- How can we open ourselves to receive such grace if it is given?
- What is the role of poverty in your life?
- Discuss how St. Francis and Mary both inform Nouwen's understanding of the Christian call to solidarity with the poor.

Recollection:

Nouwen writes: "Living spiritually is made possible only through a direct, uncushioned confrontation with the reality of death" (178).

- What is your experience of death?
- How do you relate this to the reflections on Holy Week?

"The great mystery of the spiritual life—the life in God—is that we don't have to wait for it as something that will happen later" (179).

Background on Henri Nouwen

A wealth of information about this authentic spiritual man can be found on the Internet. Some places to visit for more information include:

- The Henri Nouwen Literary Centre at <http://nouwen.net/>. For those who would like to continue on a daily journey with Henri Nouwen, the Centre's home page offers a daily meditation taken from Nouwen's writings. Links to a biographical sketch, his books, books about Nouwen, personal memories, and upcoming events can be found at this organization founded by the literary executrix of Nouwen's estate.
- Henri Nouwen Society at www.henrinouwen.org/home/home/. Visitors can subscribe to a daily meditation via email, become a friend of the Society, learn about his life and books, view a schedule of Nouwen related events, and more. This extensive Web site contains a wealth of resources. You can even find an online spiritual director.