

Father Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest who lived from 1932 until 1996. He wrote nearly 40 books on the spiritual life, taught in universities - among them Yale, Harvard, and Notre Dame, and worked with the disabled in France and Canada.

One book, published a few years before he died, is titled "*With Burning Hearts: A meditation on the Eucharistic life.*"

In this book, Nouwen breaks down the Gospel story we just heard - of the Emmaus journey - into five stages.

The first stage is titled, "Mourning our losses." In the Gospel story, the disciples are beyond disappointed. All of their hopes have been dashed to pieces. When Jesus comes to them, He doesn't immediately show himself. Rather, He walks with them ... letting them process ... allowing them to mourn ... the loss.

Nouwen ties this to the Penitential Rite of the Liturgy ... associating it with the Lord Have Mercy. In our own sorrow and times of sinfulness, we need to reflect on what we have lost ... crying out to God as we mourn our separation from Him.

The second stage he calls, "Discerning the presence." The disciples were intrigued with this traveller. They knew Jesus, but for some reason, they didn't know Him in this particular moment. We hear that Jesus opened the Scriptures for them. Again this wasn't their first time ever hearing the Bible. But rather, it was their first encounter with the Bible in a new and deeper way.

Nouwen ties this to the Liturgy of the Word ... associating it with the Word of the Lord. We read through Scripture in a three-year Sunday cycle, and a two-year weekday cycle. We hear the stories, we know the stories. But we change ... we become different with each passing moment. The familiar stories we hear over and over speak to us as something "ever ancient ... ever new." Our encounter with God's Word is an encounter with Jesus - the Word made flesh.

The third stage is called, "Inviting the stranger." Jesus, still unknown to the disciples, makes as if He is going further. They have a choice - let Him go, or invite Him to join them. We, too, have a choice - to allow things to happen while we watch, or to engage our world and interact with people and things around us.

Nouwen ties this to the Creed ... titling this chapter "I believe." Our Faith must be put into action. We cannot keep it to ourselves. And when we engage our Faith, we find ourselves helping Christ ... meeting Jesus ... and growing in our relationship with Him.

The fourth stage, is the high point of the story. This one is titled, "Entering into communion." As we become more familiar with Jesus, there is a point where we have to make a decision ... an "all or nothing" moment. Are we with Him? Are we against Him? The decision is ours.

Nouwen ties this moment to the words "Take and eat." We hear these words in every Mass, and we respond to it by getting out of our seats and coming forward to receive the Eucharistic bread and wine ... transformed miraculously into the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Do we realize that we are making a decision? Do we seek to enter into communion with Him? How does that affect us? How does that change us.

Finally, the fifth and last stage, which is called "Going on a mission." When the disciples have finally come to know that this is Jesus Who has been with them all this time ... He vanishes from their midst ... and they go back to Jerusalem ... to tell what has happened to them.

Nouwen calls this moment to the dismissal of the Mass. He calls it "Go and announce" which is one of the formulae for dismissal. When we depart from this place, we must be ready to go back and be prepared to tell how we met Christ ... and how our relationship with Him has made a difference in our lives.

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ ... having covered already two of the five stages of encounter with Christ in the Penitential Act, and the Liturgy of the Word ... let us be more attentive to the words we will profess together in the Creed ... let us enter more deeply into the Anamnesis ... as we hear the words of institution spoken at the altar.

And as we receive Him ... Jesus Christ ... in the Eucharist today ... may our hearts burn within us ... to go forth and spread His Gospel ... to the world.