

Henri Nouwen on hospitality

Henri Nouwen wrote, “The church is perhaps one of the few places left where we can meet people who are different than we are but with whom we can form a larger family.”

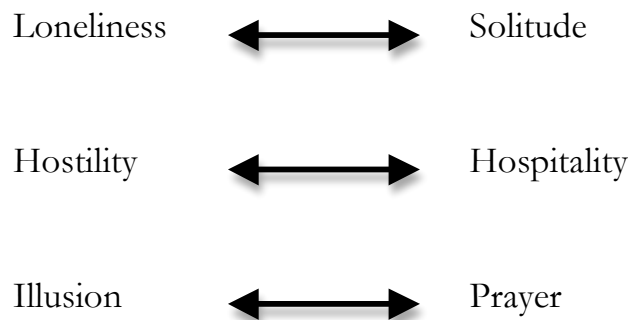
[Note: All quotes are from *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*]

To form a healthy expression of that “larger family” the parish needs to become more and more a community of hospitality. Hospitality both for the stranger and also for the existing congregation.

His model of spiritual life might be seen in these images.

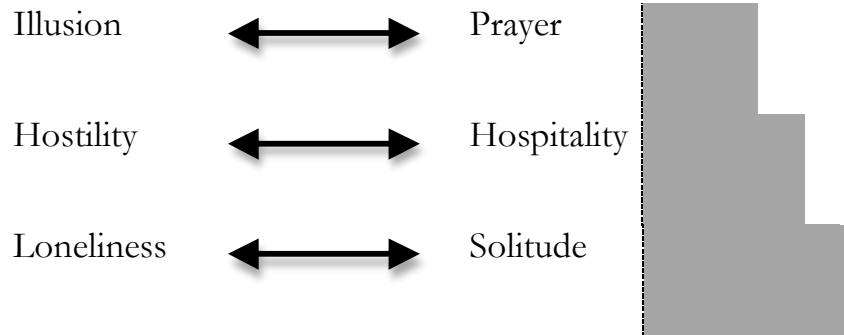
The movement between poles

The spiritual life is that constant movement between the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer. The more we come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostility and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life.



The movement toward growth

There is a relationship among the elements. As the person, or parish, increases its capacity for solitude that provides a base for growth in hospitality. And as our hospitality increases that provides a base for deeper prayer (and connection with more reality).



Here are a few of Fr. Nouwen’s insights about hospitality.

In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.

Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place.

Silence is such a difficult task ... We indeed have become very preoccupied people, afraid of unnamable emptiness and silent solitude.

Receptivity without confrontation leads to a bland neutrality that serves nobody. Confrontation without receptivity leads to an oppressive aggression which hurts everybody.

As long as we are lonely, we cannot be hospitable because as lonely people we cannot create free space. Our own need to still our inner cravings of loneliness makes us cling to others instead of creating space for them.

Nouwen’s assumption was that we are either moving toward hospitality or we are moving toward hostility. This is a spectrum with there being two ends that are at odds with each other. That’s as opposed to being a polarity in which each end has value and the task is to maintain and balance the two (for example: attention to visitors *and* time with those already part of the community.)

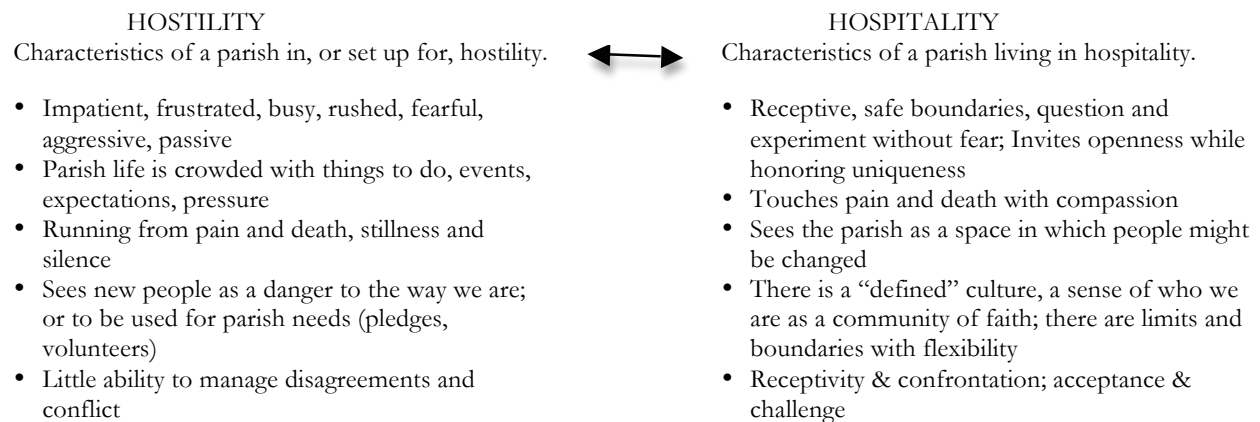
In terms of Christian spiritual life he was saying that we, as individuals and parish communities, are moving in one direction or the other.

Hostility 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Hospitality**

So a parish church may not be showing hostility in the extreme forms of aggressive anger and opposition, malevolence and malice. But it might exhibit it by being unfriendly, resentful, or having an aversion to actions that show hospitality. Or it might even show it in what seems like a more neutral way in lack of empathy for the stranger and visitor or in a failure to welcome and include.

It doesn’t have to be intentional and purposeful to be real. If you are a stranger and you walk into a parish hall where people already have places they sit with friends they know, you’re unlikely to go find a place at the table. In fact most are likely to be hesitant even if invited to join a table. However, as a visitor you may also see the value in people being with those they love and care about. But if what also happens is that no one approaches you, or someone does and you have that awkward experience of forgetting his or her name within a few seconds of being introduced – you’ll probably experience the event as uncomfortable, and may judge the parish as at best insensitive. There is a need in this to sort out our intention, or our desire, from the impact and effect of our corporate behavior.

One description of the parish church’s movement between hostility and hospitality looks like this.



The movement into increased hospitality is a decision made by individuals and parish communities that takes form in rituals and habits of hospitality, a stance of kindness and welcome, and spontaneous acts rising out of the Spirit’s movement within us.