

Unedited transcription from a talk given by Henri Nouwen to the Marguerite Bourgeoys
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SPIRITUALITY OF FUND RAISING

A CONVERSATION WITH HENRI NOUWEN

I must say at the outset that fund raising is a subject I seldom speak about. But I was invited to say a few words about it to the Directors and some of the Board members of L'Arche, and that is how I came to talk to you about it.

In a way the whole subject came up in our community because quite often, fund raising is something that happens as a response to a crisis – you don't have enough money – you're in trouble somewhere, and so you say, "We need some money, how are we going to get it, we have to start asking for it". And suddenly you realize that you aren't used to doing this, and you feel awkward about it, and you feel a little embarrassed about it. So you start thinking: "Gosh, how do you do that?" It's interesting that most people I have spoken to about fund raising feel somewhat uneasy with the idea that they have to go out and ask for money.

By way of introduction, I want to say that fund raising, if you think about it from the perspective of the Gospel, is not a response to a crisis. Fund raising is first of all, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing your vision, and inviting other people into your vision with the resources that are available to them.

-- FUND RAISING IS NOT A RESPONSE TO CRISIS. IT IS A FORM OF MINISTRY --

Fund raising is proclaiming what you believe in and proclaiming it in such a way that you offer the other person an opportunity to participate in your vision. So it is precisely the opposite of begging. It's not saying, "Please we have a problem could you help us out because lately it's been hard." It is saying, "We have a vision that is so exciting that we are giving you the opportunity to participate in that vision with the resources that God has given you.

-- YOU WON'T BECOME POORER, YOU'LL BECOME RICHER BY GIVING --

And, further, since it is a ministry, it is always a call to conversion. That is, to say to people, "I invite you to a new way of relating to your resources. So that making your resources available to us is good for you". If it is good only for us who receive; it is not fund raising in the spiritual sense of the word. Fund raising from the point of view of the gospel, is saying to people: "I will take your money only if it is good for your spiritual journey – if it's good for your health." In other words, you won't become poorer – but

you will become richer by giving. Otherwise you are saying, , "I'm here, you're there, and you're giving some a little bit," and then suddenly, you are begging again, and you are not standing up for your vision.

Certainly, fund raising, from a spiritual point of view, is a very concrete way to help the Kingdom come about. What is the Kingdom? It is the creation of a community of love in their world – and beyond this world – because wherever love is create, it is stronger than death. So when we build the Kingdom here on earth, it is a Kingdom that will reach out beyond our own chronological existence, and if you raise funds for the creation of a community of love, you are building the Kingdom. You're doing exactly what you're supposed to do as Christians.

If you say that your work is to offer a holistic, ecological approach to the question of fertility, and personal health care – if that's what you are about – then you are about the Kingdom. You are about creating a community of love. Because that's what the holistic approach to fertility is; a holistic call to be fruitful as Jesus calls us to be fruitful. And this is something about which you are not supposed to be begging.

You don't say, "Please we have a nice little project going here, and wouldn't you like to help us out a bit". No! You say, "Aren't you glad that we, who give our time and our lives to a holistic, ecologic fertility and health care, invite you in and aren't you delighted that you are allowed to make your resources available for this great work?" You see? You're now longer begging. But this is not exactly what we're talking about. I want you to sense – right here – that what we're talking about involves a real turnabout, a real conversion.

And interestingly enough, in this sense, the people of the world are often wiser than the people of the Kingdom because the world – the people who do big business – know that you never get much money if you beg for it.

I once went to see a big fund raiser in Texas, and I remember walking into his office and seeing a beautiful mahogany desk, wonderful paintings hanging on the wall, and a magnificent marble sculpture. And I said, "How do you dare to ask for money in this office?" He replied, "this is precisely why I have such a good-looking office because people, seeing it, will say that I know how to work with money – how to make it grow. They don't like to invest money in people who say, "I don't have anything." And if people do give them money, they are out begging again next week.

In any case, what this man was saying spiritually to me was, "I ask for money standing up, not bowing down, because I believe in what I am about. I believe that I have something important to offer." And he invites people to be a part of this.

I want to speak, now, about three things:

1. Your security base.
2. People who are rich
3. Asking

First of all, I want to speak very concretely about you and me, who ask for money. And I want to talk about this because it is a very important question. What is your security base? That is the question: God or Mammon? That is what Jesus would say. What is your security base? Where do you find your security? So I'm going to start talking about you and me who ask for money. Not talking about how to get money. I'm just asking about your *relationship* to money.

I'm going to play a little game with you. I am going to ask you a lot of questions, you don't have to answer any of them, but I ask you to think about them as I raise them. The general question is: What is the place of money in your life? You will never be able to ask for money if you don't know what your own relationship to money is.

Do you know how much money your father earns, or has, at this moment? Do you talk to him about money? "Dad, how much money do you earn?" And, "How much do you have in the bank?" Does your mom or your dad talk to you about this? Did they talk to you about it when you were a child? Was it a subject of your table discussions at all, ever?

Do you talk with your own children about your money? Tell them how you earn it and how you use it?

If you have money, how do you spend it? Are you inclined to cling to it because of possible emergencies? You know: "Something might happen, and I better have it there in case somebody gets sick."

Do you like to give your money to friends or institutions? You know: "Say I have a friend who is in need. He really needs a thousand, so let me give him a thousand." Or do you say "I really have compassion for the children in Somalia, I'm really so terribly frustrated, that's where I want to give a significant part of my money." Where are you, in fact, giving it?

Are you concerned as to whether or not your gift is tax deductible? Or does that even occur to you?

How do you feel when people use the money that you gave them in ways different from those for which you had given it? How do you feel about that? You give a thousand dollars to somebody who asked you because you wanted to help the children and you find out that he used it for a trip to the Caribbean. Do you get angry? Once I had a seminary president who said to me, "If you never want to be fooled, you will never give money."

How does having or not having money, affect your self-esteem? Your sense of value? Do you feel good when you have a lot – or do you think it doesn't matter at all? Or do you say, "I'm getting very nervous because maybe I'm not as good as I think I am because I don't really have any money."

Do you ever use money to control people or events? "I am a power, and if I put this money there, this is going to happen; or if I put it there, then that is going to happen." In other words, do you use your money to make things happen, as you want them to happen? Do you ever use money simply to give others the freedom to do what they want to do? I don't care how you spend it, I just want you to have it."

Instead of saying, "Do you have some money?" people say to me, "I know you have some money, I know you have different ways of spending; I want you to give me a thousand dollars. I'm going to ask a few more people, and so you have the first chance to give it to me . . . for this book." The question here is not how you ask for money, but how do you feel when people ask you for money?

I'm asking all these questions simply to get you in touch with the question: Where is your security base? Is it in God or is it in money? It's very interesting and it's very important to realize that money is one of the greatest taboos around. Greater than sex, greater than religion. A lot of people say, "Don't talk about religion, that's my private business. Don't talk about sex." But talking about money is even harder.

Money is one of the greatest taboos. And you notice this immediately when you come to fund raise . . . you don't feel that it is an easy thing, something about which you can be very "up front".

And the reason for the taboo is that money obviously has something to do with that intimate little place in your heart where you need security, and you don't want to give that away. As long as I have some money in the bank, nothing can really happen. War might come; somebody in my family might die. My father always said, "Henri, be sure you don't become dependent on anybody. Be sure that you do not have to beg. Be sure you have enough money, in case something happens, so that you don't end up in a nursing home where you don't want to be, or in a convent, where you don't want to be; be sure that you always have enough money yourself so you can have your own house and your own things, and have your own people to help you.

Jesus, however, says something very radical. He says that you cannot put your security in God and money. You have to make a choice. And all those questions I asked you were simply to ask yourself whether you are somewhere, perhaps; still putting your security in money because Jesus says put your security in God. You have to make a choice – where you want to belong, to the world or to God. Your trust, your basic trust, Jesus says, has to be in God. And as long as your trust is in money, you cannot be a true member of the Kingdom.

Now, the statement I want to make here is very simple. If you totally put your security in God, you can ask for as much money as you want. If your security is in God, then you are free to ask for money. When you are free from money, you can ask for it. The reason that we have such a hard time asking for money is precisely because it is a taboo subject. And it is a taboo subject because our own little securities are connected with it, and so we are not free. But if, on the other hand, I am absolutely sure that my whole trust is in God, and absolutely sure that I am concerned only for the

Kingdom, then I will have no trouble at all in asking you for a million dollars. All you can say is "no," and I can reply, "Fine, you missed your chance," and I can go on about my business. Do you see the connection here? It's very important, especially insofar as I address you as fund raisers – that you be free from money in terms of your security base. Now, let me tell you a little story.

I know a person, who is very very rich. And I say to him, "Hey do you have a lot of money?" What is going on when people make a remark like that? Or, "did you get something from that rich guy?" What is happening here? First of all, I think that it is sometimes just plain jealousy: "these rich people." Or sometime it's anger. How did they make all that money? "I'm not so sure that they made it in an honest way".

When we make remarks such as these, we get in touch with our own unresolved relationship with money. When rich people make us jealous or angry, we simply show that we are not free, and therefore, in a strange way, not ready to ask.

I am profoundly concerned about this for me and for the people with whom I live – that we do not ask out of anger. "You are so filthy rich; you shouldn't have all that money, and I'm going to get it from you." Now, that is not giving the person the means to become a brother; he or she realized immediately, that there is some kind of competition going on and that you are not free. The offer is no longer for the Kingdom; it no longer speaks in the name of God in whom your security is based.

Now, I want to deal with a second subject, people who are rich – I've met a number of them since coming to l'Arche. We, in l'Arche are fond of saying that God has made a preferential option for the poor. God loves the poor, and so it is with our community; our community is really committed to the poor. But sometimes we also have a prejudice against the rich, that they are not as good as the poor. They have more money than they deserve. I wonder how they got it. I wish we were as lucky as they. We make little jokes, but these jokes sometimes reveal that we might not love the rich as much as the poor. And nobody says we should love the rich less. And the rich will know it right away. And my personal experience is more and more, that rich people are also very poor – in many other ways.

Many rich people are very lonely. Many rich people suffer a lot from feelings of rejection or of being used, or of depression. And they all need a lot of attention and a lot of care. Just like the poor. Because they are as poor as the poor. And I want you to hear this, because so often I have come in touch with people who are totally in the prison of thinking "The only thing people see in me is money. So wherever I go, I am the rich aunt or the rich friend or the rich person, and I have these houses and these horses and these properties, and so I stay in my little circle, because as soon as I get out of it, people are there and say, He's rich!"

I once met a woman who had come to Daybreak; she was very wealthy, and she was very depressed and went from one psychiatrist to another, and paid them huge fees, and my feeling was a little bit that the psychiatrist was very reluctant to heal her. And she said, "You know, Henri, everybody is after my money. That's how I was born, and

that is how my family is." She went on, "Wherever I go, I never feel that people love me for who I really am. And I am so afraid that I am loved only because of my money.

I relate another story that happened to me. It was just about six years ago; someone had read a lot of my books, and called my assistant at the university; I wasn't there, I was away for a few months; and he said, "I'm reading Henri Nouwen's books and I wonder, does he need any money because I really want him to write more and it is expensive to write books these days." So my assistant called me and said that we had this banker who wants to help you with money. I didn't know what to do, so I said, "Well, go and have dinner with him." So the two went out for dinner; I stayed away for about four months, but they continued to have dinner every week – talking about all sorts of things. Finally, I came back; the two had become good friends – even though my assistant was about 25 years old, and the banker was about 50. I was invited to join my assistant to meet this banker. The man would say, "Henri, I know you don't know one thing about money". I said, "How do you know?" He answered, "I know people like writers don't know a thing about money." So I said, "Well, maybe that's true, if you want to help me with some money, that's okay." What was really going on, however, was "What you're writing about, is something I want to speak about on a more personal level, and the only way I can get into your life is through my strength which is being a banker." Ultimately, what this man was saying was; "I'm weak, and I really would like to get to know you." I replied, "Let's not talk about money right now, and let's just talk about you."

Over time, we became close friends, and we entered into a relationship, which was very, very radical – in the spiritual sense. He gave me a little money – a few thousand dollars – this happened year after year. I needed it, but I never had to ask for it. He simply gave it to me; I used it well and told him what I had done with it. But interestingly enough, it was not a relationship of begging; it was more a sharing of who he was.

When he died, his family said to me, "We as a family would like to continue supporting you because of the love that you had for my husband and my father. We find it so normal that you always feel that there are people who will support you because we love you, as our father loved you".

I'm telling you this because it shows so well that it was only through the poverty of the rich man that something very much of the Kingdom developed. And the money became real – it was there – but it wasn't. I felt really impressed by it; we both had resources, I had spiritual and they material. What was impressive was that, together, we both wanted to work for the Kingdom, to let something happen that was greater than us. You must minister to the rich from your place of wealth – spiritual wealth – you must have the courage to go to them and say, "I love you, and it is not because of your money, but because of who you are." Go to this person, not in anger – because you are just as poor and in need of love as I am; can I discover the poor in that person? Because that's where the person's blessing is. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." The rich are also very, very poor, because they have money; nobody reaches out to that place in them. If you ask money from people who have money, you have to love them

deeply and when you ask for the money, don't worry about the money, worry as to whether that person has become closer to God.

Third point, this one is about asking. Once you have placed your security base in God, and once you have learned to love the rich, and once you believe that you have something of great value to give, then you can ask whatever you want and you will get it. That's what the Gospel says: "Ask, and it will be given to you; knock and the door will be opened". Let me recall what I said earlier; asking people for money is giving them the opportunity of putting their resources at the disposal of the Kingdom, it is giving other people the chance of offering their resources for the work of God. Secondly, asking people for money is inviting them into a new communion. This is very important; asking for money is inviting people into your vision. We want you to get to know us. We want you to enter into communion with us." What you must always offer is communion, friendship and community.

If it is true that this world is full of lonely people, isolated people, then fund raising has to be community building. People have such a need for friendship and for community, and you have to believe that you have that to offer. Community is one of the greatest gifts we have to offer. Loneliness, isolation and separation are everywhere and if you ask for money, it means that you offer a new fellowship, a new brotherhood, a new sisterhood, a new way of belonging.

The money is the least interesting thing. I know people in our community who live just from the friendship with our community; they come and visit, and it is there that they find nurture and support. If these people have money, they will give it, but that is not the point. Every time these people are asked for money, you must be sure that they are invited to something; invited into this ideal that you have of health care and fruitfulness. And asking doesn't just mean inviting them to get to know some people, but to get to know a vision. You want them to see what God means when he says, "be fruitful." We want you to have an idea about the fruitfulness in the whole rich vision, which is much more important than successfulness or productivity. You've got to have a spirituality of fruitfulness that affects not only childbearing, but also life itself. We invite people into this vision, and we have a meeting, and we reflect upon our vision, and invite you to tell us what you think about. We have a vision and we think about it and write about it, and it is good to have you aboard. We are not hiding it; this is open to you.

And thirdly, asking has to be good for you, for the one who gives, and for the Kingdom.

If you come back from asking and you feel awful, there is something wrong. You have to *love* fund raising as a form of ministry. So you have to do it, and don't be tricked into thinking that fund raising is a sort of secular thing. Fund raising is as spiritual as giving a sermon – if you believe in the Kingdom. So it has to be good for you, for your conversion too, because you have to get in touch with your own hang-ups about money, you have to get in touch with who you are, and suddenly you say, "I'm afraid to ask for money, I'm afraid to say to this man, give us a thousand dollars." What are you so afraid of? Is he going to kill you? "No, I'm just afraid." Well, are you willing to be

converted so that you are no longer afraid? Are you willing to find a little piece of freedom in yourself?

-- In fund raising we discover that we are all poor and we are all rich --

Fund raising has to be good for you. And sometimes, when you ask, people may say, "Never! You'll get nothing from me." What do you do in this situation, get depressed? Jesus says, "You walk into the house and offer peace, if people don't want it, shake the sand off your shoes and walk on." Don't get depressed when someone says, "I'm not going to get involved in your project."

Asking has to be good for the person from whom you ask money. The person or group from whom you ask money has to feel that they are invited into something new.

And finally, it must be good for the Kingdom. You must be very conscious of our call. The call that you have in your life, and in God's eye, must be deepened and strengthened in your fund raising. So you must listen to it.

There are quite a few fund raisers who have said to me, "Henri, if we give you money, we want you to be more faithful to your priestly vocation, so that you don't spend your time running around doing these other things." You see? I need to be ministered to as well. People say to me, "I will give you money if you stop being so busy; you run around and talk your head off, but you don't write enough. Our kids need books about marriage and the other sacraments. I'll give you the money if you take up the challenge to be a better priest, to be more faithful to your vocation, and be more involved in it. And I know that this is difficult for you – to shut the door and sit behind your desk and not speak to anyone.

Fund raising must always create new, lasting relationships. It must keep its focus on ministry; we have something to offer – home, friendship, prayer, peace, love, fidelity and affection – and these things are so valuable that people are willing to make their resources available for them.

Fund raising then is a very rich and beautiful activity. It is an integral part of our ministry. In fund raising we discover that we are all poor and that we are all rich, and in ministering to each other – each from the riches that he or she possesses – we work together to build the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the poor.

"How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven".