

A Spirituality of Fundraising by Henri Nouwen (excerpt)

Fundraising as Ministry

From the perspective of the gospel, fundraising is not a response to a crisis. Fundraising is, first and foremost, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing our vision and inviting other people into our mission. Vision and mission are so central to the life of God's people that without vision we perish and without mission we lose our way (Prov. 29:18; 2 Kings 21:1-90. Vision brings together needs and resources to meet those needs (Acts 9:1-19). Vision gives us courage to speak when we might want to remain silent (Acts 18:9).

Fundraising is proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate with us in our vision and mission. Fundraising is precisely the opposite of begging. When we seek to raise funds we are not saying, "Please, could you help us out because lately it's been hard." Rather, we are declaring, "We have a vision that is amazing and exciting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you — your energy, your prayers, and your money — in this work to which God has called us." Our invitation is clear and confident because we trust that our vision and mission are like "trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither" (Ps. 1:3).

Fundraising is also always a call to conversion. And this call comes to both those who seek funds and those who have funds. Whether we are asking for money or giving money we are drawn together by God, who is about to do a new thing through our collaboration (see Isa. 43:19). To be converted means to experience a deep shift in how we see and think and act. To be converted is to be clothed in our right mind, to come to ourselves the way the younger son did when he was starving far from his true home (Luke 15:14-20). It is a shift of attention in which we set our mind on divine things (Matt. 16:23). "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). Fundraising as ministry involves a real conversion.

In fundraising, people who work in the marketplace are often wiser than people who work in the church. Those who are involved in big business know that you never get much money if you beg for it. I remember visiting a successful fundraiser in Texas whose office was filled with beautiful things. I said, "How do you dare to ask for money in this office?" He replied, "My office is part of my way of approaching people. It is meant to communicate that I know how

to work with money, that I know how to make money grow. This inspires confidence in the people I meet that their investment will be well used."

This approach is not for everyone, and being surrounded by nice things is not the right motivation for fundraising as ministry. Important here is that spiritually this man was saying, "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." Without apology he invites people to be a part of his vision.

In fundraising as ministry, we are inviting people into a new way of relating to their resources. By giving people a spiritual vision, we want them to experience that they will in fact benefit by making their resources available to us. We truly believe that if their gift is good only for us who receive, it is not fundraising in the spiritual sense. Fundraising from the point of view of the gospel says to people: "I will take your money and invest it in this vision only if it is good for your spiritual journey, only if it is good for your spiritual health." In other words, we are calling them to an experience of conversation: "You won't become poorer, you will become richer by giving." We can confidently declare with the Apostle Paul: "You will be enriched in every way for your generosity" (2 Cor. 9:11).

If this confident approach and

invitation are lacking, then we are disconnected from our vision and have lost the direction of our mission. We also will be cut off from our donors, because we will find ourselves begging for money and they will find themselves merely handing us a check. No real connection has been created because we have not asked them to come and be with us. We have not given them an opportunity to participate in the spirit of what we are about. We may have completed a successful transaction, but we have not initiated a successful relationship.

Here we see that if fundraising as ministry invites those with money to a new relationship with their wealth, it also calls us to be converted in relation to our needs. If we come back from asking someone for money and we feel exhausted and somehow tainted by unspiritual activity, there is something wrong. We must not let ourselves be tricked into thinking that fundraising is only a secular activity. As a form of ministry, fundraising is as spiritual as giving a sermon, entering a time of prayer, visiting the sick, or feeding the hungry. So fundraising has to help us with our conversion too. Are we willing to be converted from our fear of asking, our anxiety about being rejected or feeling humiliated, our depression when someone says, “No, I’m not going to get involved in your project”? When we have gained the freedom to ask without fear, to love fundraising as a form of ministry, then

fundraising will be good for our spiritual life.

When those with money and those who need money share a mission, we see a central sign of new life in the Spirit of Christ. We belong together in our work because Jesus has brought us together, and our fruitfulness depends on staying connected with him. Jesus tells us: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). With him, we can do anything because we know that God surrounds us with an abundance of blessings. Therefore, those who need money and those who can give money meet on the common ground of God’s love. “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8). When this happens, we can indeed say with Paul, “There is a new creation!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Where there is a new creation in Christ, there the kingdom of God is made manifest to the world.

Helping the Kingdom Come About

Fundraising is a very concrete way to help the kingdom of God come about. What is the kingdom? Jesus is very clear that

if we make the kingdom our first priority, “all these other things will be given you as well” (Matt. 6:33). The kingdom is where God provides for all that we need. It is the realm of sufficiency where we are no longer pulled here and there by anxiety about having enough. “So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself” (Matt. 6:34). Jesus also compares the kingdom to a mustard seed, “which, at the time of its sowing, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade” (Mark 4:32-32). Even a seemingly small act of generosity can grow into something far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine (see Eph. 3:20) — the creation of a community of love in this world, and beyond this world, because wherever love grows, it is stronger than death (1 Cor. 13:8). So when we give ourselves to planting and nurturing love here on earth, our efforts will reach out beyond our own chronological existence. Indeed, if we raise funds for the creation of a community of love, we are helping God build the kingdom. We are doing exactly what we are supposed to do as Christians. Paul is clear about this: “Make love your aim” (1 Cor. 14:1).

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