



Journey

Newsletter of the
National Catholic Ministry
to the Bereaved

Volume 17, No. 4

2008

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN AND THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

by Kathryn Morse

Editor's note. The article by Kathryn Morse and the one by Sister Sarah O'Malley on page five both deal with human brokenness in the spiritual journey and the compassionate response required for healing. Both Nouwen and VanGogh find that solution in their reflection on art.

... a priest, his favorite painting, and his book about it ...

Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996) is one of the most beloved Catholic figures of the 20th century. His hundreds of books and papers are recommended to Protestants, as well as Catholics, especially *The Wounded Healer*. He was born in the Netherlands, the eldest child in his family, and ordained a priest in 1957.

He had a distinguished career teaching psychology, Christian spirituality and ministry at the Catholic Theological Institute in Utrecht, Notre Dame (helping establish the psychology department), Harvard Divinity School and Yale Divinity School. The Yale University Library, Divinity School Special Collections has over 82 boxes of Nouwen's writing. This is about 30 feet of shelf space and includes books, papers, classroom materials and notes.

In 1983, he began a journey which took him away from academia and in 1986 he became the pastor at L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, Canada. More than 90 L'Arche communities throughout the world provide a home for persons with mental handicaps.

Actually, the journey away from academia may have begun sooner. In *Gracias: A Latin American Journal*, a journal he kept during six months in Bolivia and Peru, he wrote that his "intelligence, skill, power, influence or connections" were useless in his displacement from his normal surroundings. He wrote about "brokenness" and how it puts us in a place of receiving rather than giving. This experience was to be repeated and expanded upon in his spiritual journey.

In *Compassion: A Reflection on Christian Life*, Nouwen wrote, "Here we see what compassion means. It is not a bending toward the under privileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there."

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—Henri Nouwen

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Because of her long time dedication to the mission and organization of NCMB, Sister Mary Ann oftentimes worked over and above her required time to ensure our membership was served in the best possible way. To list a few of her important accomplishments — she established the new office in St. Louis, managed several national training conferences, coordinated the development of the revised Ministry of Consolation training manuals, edited and produced the quarterly issues of *Journey*, and secured several grants for projects that resulted in a plethora of new brochures and resource materials. Board members were always well served by Sister Mary Ann as she coordinated Board meeting accommodations, kept us informed, and managed the business of NCMB on a daily basis. To say the least, Sr. Mary Ann’s personal and professional presence will be greatly missed by NCMB membership and Board members.

As impossible as it may sound, Board members have committed themselves to resume the work normally done by Sr. Mary Ann. We hope there will be a smooth transition; but, we know this type of organizational shift does not occur without some wrinkles. Your patience may be needed as we become re-oriented and re-focused. We are going to explore new possibilities leveraging technology to continue our service to the membership. We will do our best to provide hospitable and efficient service in the future.

On the positive side Georgia Zarbo will continue to manage the NCMB office. If a concern arises that Georgia cannot respond to, Board members will be on a call basis to assist her.

Please keep Sister Mary Ann, Georgia, and the Board in your thoughts and prayers as these critical transitions occur.

John M. Cherek, President

LEAVE A LEGACY

You can make a difference in the lives of others. Please remember the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved, Inc., in your will.

“The Return of the Prodigal Son” continued from page 1

REMBRANDT’S *THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON*

Nouwen’s journey to the L’Arche Daybreak community began in his heart and spirit a long time before he actually made the move. But before he could leave his successful academic career to pastor at a home for the mentally challenged, he had to find himself as one who was broken and in need of a father, and as one who could be a father to the most broken.

In 1983, Nouwen discovered Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, a painting that absorbed his thoughts for several years; his own print being a part of the rest of his life. Nouwen’s book *The Return of the Prodigal Son, A Story of Homecoming*, chronicles personal reflections on the painting and his life. Nouwen’s intellectual and social exercises had brought him to a certain spiritual point, and Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son* took him farther on the journey away from power to receiving grace, from dependence on skill to dependence on God. It took him home to being more a child of God, ready to share more from his Father’s kingdom.

The painting questioned him. Who are you? Which of the figures do you identify with? His first thoughts were that he did not know what it was like to be the prodigal son, to be held and loved, to rest his head on the Father. He was one of the onlookers. Nouwen wrote, “For years I had instructed students on the different aspects of the spiritual life....But had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?”

Nouwen’s books are moving to many, because his confessions and questioning of himself lead immediately to our questioning ourselves. Had Nouwen every really dared to kneel down and let himself be held by a forgiving God? Have I ever really dared to kneel down and let myself be held by a forgiving God?

Nouwen first “met” Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son* when he himself was exhausted from a six-week lecturing tour calling for an end to violence and war in Central America. He saw the tender embrace of the father, the homecoming scene and it appealed to him, to his desire for haven for rest. Over the next several years he studied the painting and the Biblical account, for messages from each of the figures. He wanted to find “home” and “Father.”

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“The Return of the Prodigal Son” continued from page 3

NOUWEN’S REFLECTIONS ON THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Henri Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son: Story of Homecoming* contains his reflections on the painting, the characters, the painter and the scriptures. Nouwen observed that Rembrandt’s painting strays from what we have all imagined the scene to be from the scripture reading. We imagine a large estate/farm and the father running down the road to meet the prodigal son. And later, he greets the older son also outside the home, perhaps at a side entrance as he come in from the fields. Rembrandt displays everyone inside, rather than outside, and the two sons being in the scene at the same time. But, study of the faces and poses shows that Rembrandt’s work is faithful to the scriptures in a spiritual sense. The father, while not running down the road, is certainly full of a very tender love for his younger son. And the younger son is very much heart broken at his circumstances and humbles himself kneeling. And the older son, while not outside in Rembrandt’s painting, is certainly shown barely entering into the circle of light; aloof — present, yet not participating in the welcome of his brother. Indeed, it is a faithful representation of the scriptural story.

THE PRODIGAL SON

The Prodigal begins his journey by rejecting his father’s values. Nouwen writes of the eventual rejection of this younger son. After his money ran out and he was “employed” feeding hogs, he experienced total rejection when he was not even offered the pigs’ food to eat. The people around the son did not even recognize his human need for sustenance, his commonality with them. They cut him off as even being human.

And then when he desired to eat the pigs’ food, the son comes to the realization that he is not a pig, he is a human, and he is a son with a father. And he makes a decision.

The son returns to his home, not expecting total forgiveness, however. It is hard for us to imagine total forgiveness when we have thrown away our Father’s values, when we have insulted Him and gone astray.

Nouwen translated Matthew 18:3: “Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” The younger son turned toward home only hoping to participate outside his father’s home as a laborer, but found himself restored to complete sonship, a picture of being “re-born” into the Kingdom.

Meditate on the painting and imagine yourself in the place of the returning prodigal.

THE ELDER SON

In the painting, the elder son stands aside, on the edge of the lighted area. He holds his hands rather than opening them in welcome. Here is a picture of a man who is physically in his father’s house, yet in his heart he is far away. Perhaps, over the years “dark” feelings had festered in the elder son’s heart: envy at the liberties taken by his brother, judgment and condemnation and growing bitterness and anger.

Nouwen said, “Looking into myself and then around me at the lives of other people, I wonder which does more damage, lust or resentment? There is so much resentment among the ‘just’ and the ‘righteous.’ There is so much judgment, condemnation and prejudice among the ‘saints.’ There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding ‘sin.’”

Did the elder son let the light of the Father eventually warm his heart and hands? The Biblical account nor the painting provide the answer. We can only hope so.

THE FATHER

Nouwen spent some time discussing how the father goes out to both sons. That is something I had never noticed. Many of us have heard homilies describing how the father ran out to the prodigal, but I had never heard a description of him going out to the older. But he did go out to greet the elder son and ask him to come in.

Nouwen said the he could no longer think of God as being hard to find. God is the one doing the looking; we are the ones lingering outside or even hiding.

CONCLUSION

The younger son made a change and the older son was asked to do so. Nouwen wrote: “People who have come to know God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself...” They move into the light of the Father.

Henri J. M. Nouwen passed away unexpectedly in September 1996. We are most fortunate that he was a prolific writer. Generations can benefit from his meditations and relationship with the Father as a son.

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Author Kathryn Morse enjoys life in the Arts and Museum District in New Orleans, LA. She has a Master of Education degree from Louisiana Tech University and a Master of Public Administration from Texas Tech University. Her favorite annual challenge is to be lector for Palm Sunday Mass.

“COMO PREVENIR LA DEPRESIÓN”

Diácono Ray Ortega.

La depresión es algo muy serio y triste. Para prevenirla hay que asimilar bien los golpes de la vida, sabiendo que algunos de ellos son inevitables, ya que la vida desde que nacemos hasta que partimos a la Casa del Padre es todo lucha y superación. Uno de los medios más fáciles para caer en un estado de depresión es el de no tener ilusiones y metas, es el no tener razones profundas para vivir, y encontrar la vida vacía, y sin contenido algun. Hay que tener ilusiones y cultivar sueños, al igual que proponerse metas y luchar por alcanzarlas.

Si nosotros nos proponemos ser felices y positivos, ayudar más a los demás agradando siempre a Dios, cultivando muchas ilusiones y metas, vamos a experimentar entusiasmo, alegría de vivir, deseos de tener una vida más larga y estaremos siempre más animados. Por que?. Porque tendremos grandes motivos para vivir.

Tenemos que tratar de mantenernos siempre ocupados. Hemos sido hechos para el trabajo, estamos muy bien equipados para construir un mundo mejor , no para perder mucho tiempo haciendo nada, eso frustra y por lo tanto deprime. Recordemos siempre que el mundo y nuestro prójimo necesitan de nosotros..

Otro modo de prevenir la depresión es si aprendemos a perdonar a los que nos han ofendido, nunca guardemos rencor y resentimientos. Debemos

aprender a liberarnos de todo odio; si no, la persona que nos ofendió se convierte en nuestra obsesión. Nos deprimimos si la persona triunfa, y si fracasa, nos alegramos con una satisfacción morbosa que al final nos llevará a la frustración y remordimiento de conciencia. Por eso es importante aprender a perdonar y olvidar la ofensa. El deseo de venganza que acompaña al odio envilece. Aprendamos a perdonar y evitaremos la depresión.

Hay otros modos practicos para prevenir la depresión, y son: Hacer ejercicios, escuchar música, y buscar buenas compañías. Pero el más importante de todos es: Buscar a Dios, apegarse a Su Palabra. La Palabra de Dios contiene todos los elementos necesarios para producir en nosotros grandeza, alegría y entusiasmo. si leemos todos los dias las Sagradas Escrituras poco a poco iremos notando más crecimiento en nuestra fe, y más seguridad y fortaleza en nosotros, y eso nos ayudara a prevenir la depresión.



Deacon Ray Ortega was ordained in 1979 for the Archdiocese of Miami. He is a certified Pastoral Bereavement Specialist from the World Pastoral Care Center and a member of the South Florida Chapter of ADEC. He is Master of Ceremonies for the Auxiliary Bishop, the Most Rev. Felipe de Jesus Estevez. Ray currently serves on the NCMB Board.

DATES TO REMEMBER

Saturday, February 23, 2008

Retreat

“A Time to Care for Me”

Cincinnati, Ohio

TeipenKM@AOL.com

Saturday, March 1 to

Sunday March 2, 2008

**Ministry of Consolation
Training**

*Diocese of Scranton,
Pennsylvania*

Diocesan Spirituality Center

Dalton, Pennsylvania

Mary-Ann-Paulukonis@

dioceseofscranton.org

Wednesday, April 16, 2008

1:30 pm - 4:00 pm EDT

Hospice Foundation of America

National Bereavement

Teleconference

“Living With Grief:

Children and Adolescents”

Friday, April 25 to

Saturday April 26, 2008

**Ministry of Consolation
Training**

Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey

Our Lady of Good Counsel - West Trenton

Marilyn Schipp:

609-406-7400 x5557