

## A Selection from *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen*

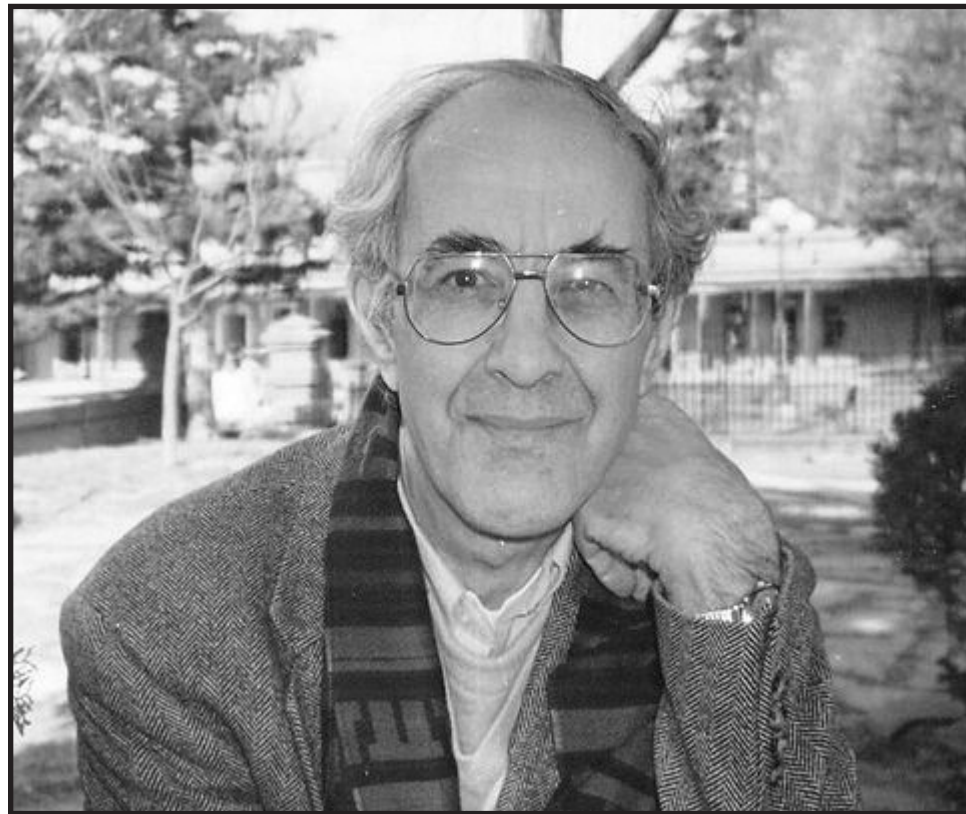
By Michael Ford

Many TAC readers will be familiar with the work of Henri Nouwen (1932–1996), a Dutch-born priest, spiritual leader, and mystic whose writings influenced millions of people worldwide. In his new book *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (Paulist Press, 2018), journalist and theologian Michael Ford weaves together first-hand accounts of friends of Nouwen, personal reflections on Nouwen's life and work, and quotes from Nouwen himself to create a rich, mosaic-like biography of this "wounded healer." The following selection is from a chapter titled "The Interior Castle," which examines, among other things, the influence of psychological language and practice on Nouwen's religious vision. We are grateful to Michael Ford and to Paul McMahon at Paulist Press for their help in facilitating this excerpt—Ed.

Henri Nouwen's psychological training in Kansas between 1964 and 1966 was one of the most significant periods of his life, as he learned to integrate his spiritual journey with his newly found psychological knowledge and understanding. It became the formational springboard for his teaching and writing ministry that was waiting in the wings. Henri won a fellowship in religion and psychiatry to study at the Menninger Foundation for Psychiatric Education and Research in Topeka.

When Henri arrived at Menninger as one of the first Roman Catholic priests to train there, he again felt different as he found himself among other ordained men of different Christian denominations, along with Jewish rabbis and psychiatrists. They had lively discussions about how the disciplines could meld, for the benefit of the Church and the world of psychiatry. "Henri represented the best combination in that he was able to combine those two dimensions better than anybody I knew," said Dr. John Dos Santos. "I'd seen others who became counselors, clinicians, or therapists, and those who never did a good job bringing it together. I always had the sense that Henri was someone who spoke like a counselor and therapist, but at the same time, in terms of theology, what he said was professionally, therapeutically, relevant stuff."

It was Dr. Dos Santos who brought him to the University of Notre Dame, at South Bend, Indiana, to help set up the program in pastoral theology. Once again, Henri stood out at Notre Dame for his different approach to psycholo-



Photograph of Henri Nouwen. Frank Hamilton/Wikimedia Commons

gy. Several members of the staff were trained in the more scientific school of classical behaviorism, which places strong emphasis on measuring people's behavioral patterns but tends to be distrustful of what is said about what is going on inside a person. Henri, however, placed a lot of emphasis on people's experience; it was the inner life that had to be known rather than a person's outer behavior.

His psychology had been much influenced by some of his professors who were phenomenologists. They had focused on a person's experi-

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ence, describing it in as much detail as possible and giving particular attention to the inner life. In many ways, Henri's evolving spirituality emerged from the psychology he had been exposed to, rather than the other way around. From the outset, Henri opted for a pastoral rather than a scholarly approach to teaching. Eager to convey a knowledge of God that was real, simple, and direct, he wanted, as much as he could, to help students on their own journeys. Although intellectually astute, he never saw himself as an academic but as a pastor using the classroom as a pulpit. From the start, he understood his ministry as "laying down his life for one's friends," not as a literal form of physical martyrdom, but as someone who had sufficient self-knowledge, as advocated by St. Teresa of Avila in the first mansion of her interior castle, to offer his pain and confusion toward the healing and

growth of others.

It must be acknowledged that Henri felt a degree of disconnection during his early years in the United States. Away from Holland and in a new culture, his need for friendship and community preoccupied his thoughts, while, at the same time, he was continually anxious about whether he would succeed in his chosen path. But he also came to own the fact that these very insecurities were part of the great human struggle. So, if he were in touch at a personal level with the uncertainties within himself, as a teacher and

writer he could put other people in touch with theirs.

To put it in a more spiritual framework, he believed that, before announcing the good news, he had first to break the ground where healing could bear fruit. The Word of God needed fertile soil. Just as God stripped himself of power and Jesus did not cling to his equality with the Father, so, as a follower of Christ, Henri believed he had to offer his own bandaged wounds—that is, hurts that had been cared for—as a source of grace for others. His gift, therefore, was not his power but his willingness to be powerless and to trust that God's healing power would be made visible through that. Popular and respected among students, Henri found the work exhausting at times because so many people were drawn to him. Yet he would always go the extra mile to support anyone in need and, on one occasion, he gave particular support

to a seminarian whose mental health issues had culminated in a depression.

However, toward the end of his first year as professor of pastoral psychology at the University of Notre Dame, he too was in crisis. In May 1967, he visited Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, where, in some distress, he requested to see a brother, John Eudes Bamberger, who confirmed to me, "Henri was going through a difficult time in his life. He showed up at the guesthouse and asked if there was a monk he could talk to. When the guest master found out he was a professor of psychology, he thought someone with my own background as a physician would be appreciated. Obviously, I cannot and would not say what we discussed, but Henri felt it was very helpful and that was the beginning of our friendship. He came with considerable stress and crisis—and he left in peace." (On that visit, he also met another resident monk, Thomas Merton, his spiritual hero, a year before Merton's death.)

Henri Nouwen dedicated his first book, *Intimacy*, to John Eudes. A series of essays in pastoral psychology, the text also reflects on questions that lie at the heart of the mystical quest: How can I find creative and fulfilling intimacy in my relationship with God and my fellow human beings? How can one person develop a fruitful intimacy with another person? What does intimacy mean in the life of a celibate priest or in a community of religious? How can we be intimate with God during moments of celebration or silent prayer? Despite the private anxieties that were contributing at times toward a suffocating loneliness, he was still communicating "the unspeakable beauty of the divine" to his students. As John Dos Santos put it, "What I recall is the holiness of the man and the almost magnetic effect he had on people—his ability to trust and for people to trust him. I have never met a saint before but he's as close as I ever got to one."

***Michael Ford is a journalist and theologian specializing in the work of Henri J. Nouwen and other contemporary wounded healers. He is the author of a range of books including Father Mychal Judge: An Authentic American Hero, Spiritual Masters for All Seasons, and Becoming the Presence of God, all published by Paulist Press. Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen (paperback, 164 pages, \$16.95) is available wherever books are sold.***