

Henri Nouwen: A Spirituality of Imperfection.

By: Wil Hernandez.

Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006.

192 pp. \$16.95.

Books written by and about Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), a Dutch Roman Catholic priest and gay man, spiritual director and writer, professor and pastor, have presented his spiritual sojourn with its accompanying inspiration and challenges. This book stands out among the rest in its comprehensive portrayal of Nouwen as a restless seeker, a wounded healer and a faithful struggler (95). Within the context of “a spirituality of imperfection,” author Wil Hernandez addresses how Nouwen struggled with psychological wounds, physical limitations and emotional needs and grappled with feelings of abandonment, restlessness, anxiety and loneliness (76).

The book’s two-part structure centers around a dual focus on the dynamic of Nouwen’s spiritual formation and his lived spirituality. The first focus, developed in chapters one through three, involves Nouwen’s integrated approach to cultivating one’s relationship with self, others and God in a three-fold dynamic inward, outward and upward. To do so, argued the author, Nouwen incorporated spirituality, theology, psychology and ministry in a seamless fashion (1). The second focus, treated in chapters four and five, comprises the strongest part of the book, which explores Nouwen’s “spirituality of imperfection,” a spirituality that is both counterintuitive and countercultural. It is counterintuitive because, according to Hernandez, Nouwen came to appreciate how the integrated pursuit of wholeness and holiness actually constitutes inherent imperfections: psychological, ministerial and theological. In other words, the journey to perfection is through imperfection (88). For Nouwen, such spirituality runs counter to cultural ideals of instant progress, quick fix, self-empowerment and actualization, the inordinate drive for wholeness (2).

Filipino author, Hernandez, informs the reader that “I write as a Protestant evangelical with decidedly ecumenical leanings and deep Catholic roots (something which I have recently come to appreciate anew)” (xv). The book engages the author’s beliefs and convictions about pursuing unity within God’s Church by embracing a “more generous orthodoxy.” According to Hernandez, Nouwen, “being the true ecumenist that he was,” stands as an embodiment of spiritual generosity (xv). Hernandez also advocates for a theology of imperfection, challenging the “so-called victorious life teaching so wide-spread today” whose triumphalism lacks a robust theology of the cross (81). He returns to Nouwen as exemplar who became convinced that weakness forms the basis for fruitfulness. In other words, for Hernandez, conformity to Christ does not mean “moral perfectionism and victory over sin” but rather “a faithful wrestling with God that gradually ripens into a mature communion or “completeness” with the Divine” (x).

This book has the potential to engage a cross-denominational and cross-cultural audience, making Henri Nouwen's story more accessible in diverse settings. Those already familiar with Nouwen will be edified and inspired anew. That the author consulted a wide range of contemporary and historical spiritual teachers and theologians to clarify his insight or further his argument is a particular strength of the book. Providing a chronological ordering of Nouwen's writings (e.g., in the list of Frequently Cited Works) would have been helpful to give some indication of the progression of his thoughts. Programs of spirituality and spiritual formation will benefit from using this book.

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