

Henri Nouwen: A Spirituality of Imperfection

by **Wil Hernandez**

Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006

155 pages, USD\$ 16.95

Reviewed by Bobbie Bonk

In 1994 when Spiritual Directors International member Wil Hernandez first heard about Henri Nouwen, he had no idea of the impact that Nouwen would have on his understanding of the spiritual journey. By studying the Catholic priest's writings, Hernandez discovered that the "conceptual threads" of spirituality, psychology, ministry and theology, were part of his own spiritual journey (p. xii).

Hernandez divides *Henri Nouwen: A Spirituality of Imperfection* into two parts: the integrated journey and the imperfect journey. Part one interprets Nouwen's understanding of the threefold motion as being inward (toward self), outward (toward others), and upward (toward God). As one strives for perfect love, this dynamic integration allows the Christian life to be a process of becoming perfect through imperfection. Though Hernandez tells Nouwen's story in a way that exposes some of the deep struggle and imperfection that was a part of the priest's life, he invites the reader to allow Henri Nouwen to be a spiritual guide. Nurtured through solitude, service, and prayer progressive holiness comes through personal weakness and powerlessness (p. 3). This the author demonstrates very well in the second part of the book when he describes the spirituality of imperfection and speaks of Nouwen as the perfect example.

In caring for others, Nouwen used three approaches: the intrapersonal, the intradisciplinary, and the interdisciplinary, which established links between spirituality and psychology, psychology and theology, spirituality and the process of spiritual formation. Though these disciplines are distinct, there is a necessary interaction between them. Through a combination of these processes, one can become self-aware and acknowledge the God within one's heart, leading to transformation, conversion, repentance, and true integrity. Hernandez sees spiritual formation as the "process of being with Christ in order to become like Christ and consequently live for Christ" (p. 32). Nouwen describes this as "intimacy, formation and service" (p. 32).

One of the most beautiful sections in the book is about the service of hospitality. Spiritual directors who read the text will easily relate to Hernandez quoting Nouwen from *The Wounded Healer* about creating an empty space "where the guest can find his [sic] own soul" (p. 42) even in the midst of brokenness and pain. Nouwen himself offered soul care described as "a selfless sharing of one's life motivated by a deep caring for another person's life" (p. 46). Even in the midst of imperfection, one celebrates the spiritual life with a recognition of "being loved by God, convinced that this truth represents the very essence of our existence...becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfolded in everything we think, say, or do"

(p. 64). Growing in awareness of the presence of God in the other person's story is formational and mutual.

Nouwen's need to work for social justice was a concrete overflow of compassion. One's personal experience of God must flow into ministry, balancing "the tension between interiority and exteriority" (p. 50) where "contemplation and ministry go hand in hand" (p 51).

Hernandez presents the ideas of a variety of well-known spiritual teachers and theologians as well as some very poignant quotes from Nouwen's books. His rich bibliography offers abundant resources for those who would like more background information.

*Bobbie Bonk works at a Roman Catholic church in Fort Collins, Colorado, USA. In addition, she facilitates retreats, offers spiritual direction, and volunteers with inmates at a local detention center. By participating in workshops for adult survivors of childhood abuse led by Mary's Hope in Denver, Colorado, USA, she has enhanced her spiritual direction training from the Center for Spiritual at Work's Formation Program for Spiritual Directors, also in Denver. Her e-mail address is [bbonk@comcast.net](mailto:bbonk@comcast.net).*

Reprinted with permission from *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol 13.1. Published by Spiritual Directors International, [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org). All rights reserved.