

## IN THE NAME OF JESUS COMMENTARY

Henri Nouwen's prolific influence is changing the way people view the theological and spiritual dynamics of ministry through the continuing impact of his writings. The relevance of one particular title, a small but wisdom-packed book, called *In the Name of Jesus* is captured well in a *Christianity Today* magazine quote: "*In the Name of Jesus* draws provocative and stimulating conclusions about the meaning and significance of Christian ministry."

It is worth recapitulating here the message of this particular book for two specific reasons. First, it highlights the theological and spiritual dynamics of Henri Nouwen's overall concept of ministry. Second, it decidedly brings out the counterintuitive and countercultural distinctives of the principles and methods of his ministry clearly.

*In the Name of Jesus* is intended primarily as a book on Christian leadership but its broad principles and insights apply to ministry in general. Using images drawn from his experience with the handicapped and disabled people at L'Arche as a backdrop, Henri Nouwen weaves his entire material as a commentary on two very familiar Gospel accounts: the temptation of Jesus in the desert (Mt 4:1-11) and Peter's call to be a shepherd (Jn 21:15-19).

Interestingly, the three temptations of Jesus and the threefold question of Jesus to Peter suit Henri Nouwen's famous flair for structuring his material using a three-point outline. For our purposes, however, I will instead narrow it down to a dual focal point to include an expanded description of each of the temptations followed by the corresponding antidote.

### **The Temptation to be Relevant**

Henri Nouwen interprets Jesus' first temptation (turning stones into bread) as the perennial temptation that ministers face *to be relevant* in our success-driven and consumerist world. Whatever contexts in which we find ourselves, we are always confronted with that irresistible pull to be indispensable, competent, productive and in control.

Author Eugene Peterson, in his prophetic book *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, confronts this all-too familiar draw that lures many ministers who are on the verge of being "awash in ... the idolatry of a religious career that they can take charge of and manage." When ministers begin substituting their own sense

of calling and personal vocation with the secular concept of a career, they often find themselves succumbing to the external pressure of having to deliver the ministry goods, so to speak. Somehow they have to be assured that they are worth their salt as a minister. They have to feel significant all the time, able and ready to respond to every need that is screaming to be met.

This temptation to be relevant harps on the erroneous thinking that productivity is the basis of our ministry, something that consequently distorts even our sense of identity. What makes it blinding, Nouwen warns us, is how "[i]n a variety of ways we are made to believe that we are what we produce" thus leading us to an inordinate obsession with "products, visible results, tangible goods, and progress" (SWC:49-50).

Contrary to what many in our culture might expect, Henri Nouwen believes that the true minister of God is called to be "completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her vulnerable self" (INJ:17). Needless to say, this posture of humility, which incidentally Jesus modeled for us in the gospels, is so counterculture that it does not make immediate sense. No one wishes to be marginalized; everybody wants to be counted and make a significant dent where we are. But Henri Nouwen insists that this kind of posturing is nowhere close to the heart of God.

### **The Antidote: Contemplative Prayer**

What we need, Henri Nouwen declares, are ministers who know the true heart of God and are driven not by a hungry need to be significant in the world but by a desperate love for Jesus. He spells out an integrated theological and spiritual dynamic: "Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing" (INJ:27). Nouwen adds, "When we do not live in deep communion with God ... then religion is easily put into the service of our desire for success, fame, and stardom" (SJ:164).

To minister with this kind of inner conviction, one has to be a contemplative mystic whose identity is rooted in the love of God and who practices the discipline of dwelling in God's presence through prayer (INJ:29). Through the regular practice of contemplative prayer, ministers learn to listen and discern God's voice and there "find the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them" (INJ:31). Most leaders in the church act and respond to needs not out of having been induced by God's prompting but by their ambition and compulsion to make something happen according to their desires and sometimes, even gainful advantage.

From Henri Nouwen's perspective, prayer is as much an act of holiness as it is an act of ministry; it serves us even as it serves others as well. Through the discipline of prayer, we remember "that our own limited actions are rooted in the unlimited power of his name." Prayer involves a humble acknowledgment of God's creator status as opposed to our creaturely status. Therefore, for Henri Nouwen, "[t]o pray is to walk in the full light of God, and to say simply, without holding back, 'I am human and you are God.'" Ultimately, it is not our agenda that matters.

Moreover, prayer is not only an expression of our dependency upon God but also our vital interdependency with other people. In fact, "we get closest to God when we are willing to be vulnerable, when we are willing to say, 'I need somebody else.'" We not only need to learn to practice the presence of God in our lives but also to practice the presence of one another in our community. It is in community "where God happens"—when people pray and contemplatively listen to God and to each other in silence.

In a substantive way, Henri Nouwen's understanding of spiritual formation entails "the practicing of the paradox that prayer asks much effort but can only be received as a gift." Contemplative prayer is all that; we exercise and receive it as a gift. Prayer operates as a powerful theological and spiritual dynamic to counter the creeping seduction of worldly relevance in a minister's vocation.

### **The Temptation to be Spectacular**

The second temptation has to do with the enticement *to be spectacular*. For Jesus, it meant having to give in to the sensational feat of throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. Behind that so-called "act" lay an accompanying temptation to prove something. But as Nouwen puts it, "Jesus refused to be a stuntman" (*INJ*:38).

Our culture applauds stunts. We are forever enamored by grandiose displays of feats. As Henri Nouwen puts it, "We act as if visibility and notoriety were the main criteria of the value of what we are doing" (*SWC*:56). For many today, being spectacular is about engaging in popular, high-profile ministry activities to show off our self-sufficiency. It is tantamount to proudly parading our highly individualistic inclinations. Describing the common profile of a heroic individualist, Nouwen points to the dominant image of "the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone" (*INJ*:39).

In fact, many of our churches boast of our own versions of celebrity ministers because we have congregations who eagerly promote a cult-like following of their leaders. Never mind if these leaders do not have any kind of accountability whatsoever to anyone as long as everyone stands to profit from the "stardom" status which the church projects within the community.

Image has become the all-consuming passion of church life these days. "The bigger, the better" is, and has always remained the slogan of the church. Henri Nouwen bemoans the fact that popularity has woefully replaced the true essence of ministry.

### **The Antidote: Confession and Forgiveness**

If something needs to be inculcated constantly in the minds of ministers, it is the critical understanding that ministry is "a communal and mutual experience" (*INJ*:40). Ministry is not just done by the celebrated people in the church; ministry is everybody's undertaking—whether one is popular or not. As we minister together, "it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us" (*INJ*: 41). In so doing it leaves no room for elevating superstars who merely end up usurping God's glory.

We would do well to also be reminded that service is not a one-way street. We minister as we ourselves are ministered to. We give as needy people who are also willing to receive in the process. The New Testament is replete with lucid passages that address the theme of mutuality in ministry within the larger context of community life. One cannot possibly ignore the numerous "one another" texts in the epistles: admonishing one another (Rom 15:7), encouraging one another (1 Thess 5:11), bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), to name a few.

According to Henri Nouwen, ministers have to have the openness and humble willingness to confess their own neediness and brokenness in order to overcome the snare of what he dubs "individual heroism" (*INJ*:45). Furthermore, they need always to be ready to ask for forgiveness from the people they minister to when necessary, so that their ministry takes place within the context of a healing and reconciling presence of Jesus.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that ministers are "called to minister with their whole being, including their wounded selves" (*INJ*:50). Far from projecting a spectacular image of invincibility, we minister best out of our authentic selves—utterly powerless apart from God's infusion of power. In God's eyes, leaders and followers alike, we are all the same. We all

need God desperately and we need each other completely. In community, all of us have a vital accountability to confess and all of us have an obligation to forgive. The theological and spiritual dynamics of confession and forgiveness fill a critical role in our community since they assume "the concrete forms in which we sinful people love one another" (INJ:46).

### **The Temptation to be Powerful**

The third and final temptation is the temptation to be *powerful*. Henri Nouwen considers this to be the most seductive of all three temptations and depicts this all-pervading temptation as taking on the alarming characteristics of domination, control, and self-assertion. All these dangerous tendencies reinforce the illusion that "life is ours to dispose of" (SWC:61).

Indeed there is perhaps nothing more challenging to subdue than our obsession with power. As the cliché goes, wherever we go, power is the name of the game. Nouwen reminds us of the sad reality that

Power always lusts after greater power precisely because it is an illusion. Despite our experience that power does not give us the sense of security we desire, but instead reveals our own weaknesses and limitations, we continue to make ourselves believe that more power will eventually fulfill our needs (SWC:62).

As to why he perceives "the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat," Henri Nouwen offers a revealing explanation:

Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love (INJ:60).

This is indeed so sobering but so true, as our own experiences have proven time and again. We are reminded of the ministers who merely exercise heavy-handed authority devoid of love and concern for people. Employing high-powered control over their subordinates is often the only way they can compensate for their relational deficiency. Such leaders aggressively insist on the primacy of their position as the leader, as the one completely in charge. They reflect the hallmark traits of a culture that seems determined to infect others, even the best, in the ministry.

### **The Antidote: Theological Reflection**

With equally determined effort, Henri Nouwen subverts such dominant forces by advocating certain countercultural incentives. True spiritual leadership, Nouwen submits, is one in which "power is constantly abandoned in favor of love" (*INJ*:63).

Nouwen compels us to follow a different vision of maturity that Jesus espoused. This, among other things, entails having a willingness of heart to be led where we would rather not go, even if that might mean pursuing a downward path versus an upward path. As true ministers, the challenge for us is to tread the route of powerlessness, servanthood, and humility—the kind of route that our culture has serious problems validating.

As we know, Henri Nouwen walked this path himself. In his spiritual biography on Henri Nouwen, Michael O'Laughlin details some of the many decisive moves Nouwen took to stay out of the limelight:

He immersed himself in Cistercian monasteries, Latin American slums, and Ukranian missions. The Daybreak community, where he ultimately found a home, was a very obscure destination.

The one that proved to be the greatest step downward on Nouwen's part was his choice to leave the Ivy League environment of Harvard University to live among the handicapped people at L'Arche Daybreak. This was by no means an easy decision for Henri Nouwen. What Nouwen found extremely helpful for his own decision-making process was the same discipline he recommends for every minister to engage in habitually: the discipline of strenuous theological reflection.

Patricia O-Connell Killen and John de Beer, in their introductory book *The Art of Theological Reflection*, provides us with a helpful overview of what this particular discipline involves:

Theological reflection is the process of seeking meaning that relies on the rich heritage of our Christian tradition as a primary source of wisdom and guidance. It presumes the profoundly incarnational (God present in our lives), providential (God caring for us), and revelatory (source of deepening knowledge of God and self) quality of human experience.

The exercise of this discipline allows us to discern critically where we are being led, that is, to learn to think

with the mind of Christ versus relying on our own wisdom. Doing so helps counteract the ever-present pressure for ministers to seek power other than what God provides, which, ironically is itself counterintuitive because it is the kind of power found in weakness. Theological reflection is a theological and spiritual dynamic ministers can never do without. We have more need of leaders and ministers who are reflective thinkers than activist doers, totally reliant upon the wisdom from above than human power and instincts.

In summary, even though many would consider relevance, popularity, and power as key ingredients of an effective ministry, they are, in reality, "not vocations but temptations" in the ministry (*INJ*:71). All three temptations lure us "to return to the ways of the world of upward mobility and divert us from our mission to reveal Christ in the world" (*SWC*:49). For Henri Nouwen, the true image of God's minister is that of a praying, vulnerable, trusting minister (*INJ*:73). It is an image that contradicts the very culture that continually presses us into a mold that even Jesus would have had trouble fitting.

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**Parenthetical NOTES** (Henri Nouwen):

*INJ* *In the Name of Jesus*  
*SJ* *Sabbatical Journey*  
*SWC* *The Selfless Way of Christ*

**Other NOTES:**

Michael O'Laughlin, *God's Beloved: A Spiritual Biography of Henri Nouwen*.  
Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*.

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