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The reality of celibate life: Reflections from Henri Nouwen

by A.W. Richard Sipe

Examining the Crisis



Recently I was in the process of cleaning out some files and ran across a

July 1991 letter from Henri Nouwen. He and I had spent a year together during the mid 1960s in Topeka, Kansas at the Menninger Foundation's training programs for clergy counselors. We had kept in casual contact afterward. He moved on to professorships at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard and traveled the troubled world while I settled into clinical practice, married life, and part time work at a Catholic seminary, college, and medical school in Baltimore.

By the time Henri wrote this letter he had already become a huge spiritual resource through his writings, retreats, lectures, teaching, and personal contacts. Most of his 40 books had been published. In contrast I had just recently (in 1990) published my first book, *A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy*

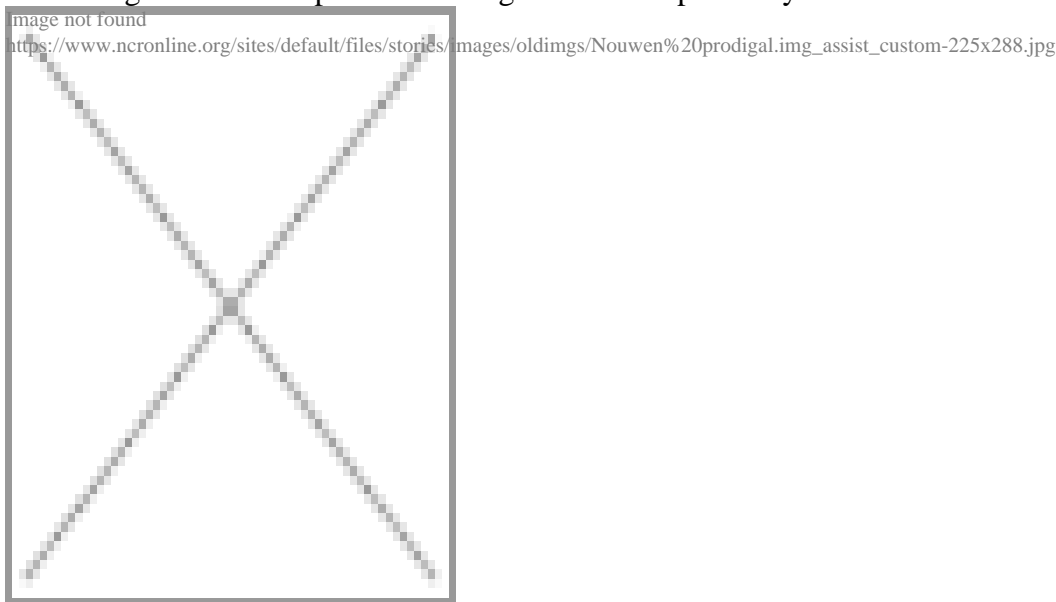
In February I had gone to Daybreak -- a L'Arche community near Toronto -- to spend retreat time with Henri. While I was there he was working on *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (in my mind the most personally integrated of all his books). We talked about his writing and he gave me a copy of the Rembrandt poster that meant so much to him.

This was no silent retreat either; I accompanied Henri on his daily round of duties to visit his beloved *sisters* and *brothers* -- the developmentally disabled in the L'Arche community houses. I remember well our daily exchanges. Henri was focused on the idea of *Communion* -- evidence of his creative process and fecundity.

It came up in evening conferences and lunch meetings with local pastors and in a formal lecture in Toronto. Experiencing all his ministries made it easy to decipher where his inner longings were at that time -- to hear the words *you are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.*? His two books published in 1992, *Life of the Beloved* and the completed *Return of the Prodigal Son* confirmed the observation.

During our last days together Henri shared the spiritual-emotional crisis that descended upon him a year and a half before. The content -- or rather the empty abyss -- of his depression was clear: the loneliness of celibacy.

After resigning his teaching appointments and making a commitment to Daybreak he had for the first time in his life opened himself to a human relationship and love he had never experienced. He was faced with himself as never before -- his sexuality and celibacy were naked and undefended. It was a heart wrenching emotional experience during which he kept a diary.



He wanted to talk about two things. The first was whether he should publish the diary that recorded such a soul wrenching and intimate struggle. I said it would be helpful to many folks who suffer. He finally agreed with many friends who had the same thought and *Inner Voice of Love* (1996) was published four months after his death.

Henri was aware of my clinical work with priests and seminarians. He and I met in Baltimore while he was still teaching at Yale and I was teaching at St. Mary's Pontifical Seminary.

We shared our current interests. Henri's were meditation and spirituality. Mine were celibacy and sexuality. Henri was still the self-described *restless, nervous, intense?* person who asked me for some encouragement about the talks on meditation he was going to present to the seminarians. He expressed surprise at my observations about the amount of sexual activity among the students and faculty.

In 1991 the second topic he wanted to talk about was celibacy and sexual orientation. Mainly his questions were about orientation. What really is it? Is it possible to alter it? What are the origins? What are its implications for celibacy? How does it affect spirituality? He was not quite at a point of personal resolution then.

But Henri was the genuine article. He was exactly what he appeared -- a priest struggling for integrity, exhausting himself in the service of others.

Henri's depression -- which he named "a struggle through anguish to freedom" -- reminded me of Thomas Merton's account of his love affair with "M" after so many years in the monastery (found in Volume 6 of *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*). Merton wrote feely about his loneliness, desolation, and celibate conflicts precipitated by his relationship with her.

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Both priests (Merton and Henri) came to grips with the deepest levels of their sexuality through the attachment and loss of a love relationship. Those depths cannot be fathomed without squeezing the life out of loneliness and embracing it until it renders aloneness (genuine solitude) full of meaning. The lives of many saints show that depression is involved in that process.

After I returned home I sent Henri copies of two talks I had given: "Spirituality and Integrity" at Princeton Theological Seminary Dec. 4, 1990 and "The Celibate/Sexual Agenda" for The CORPUS National Meeting for a renewed priesthood June 22 in New York.

This communication prompted his letter to me.

He said that he enjoyed the Princeton talk and "got a lot out of it." But he had reservations about the New York talk. After stating that he had many questions he would like to talk more about he wrote:

"I also feel there is a dimension to the issue of celibacy that is absent from your presentation and, by its absence, gives your presentation an overly strong "political" character. Somehow I think that we really need to think more deeply about the mystery of communion and start talking in a new way about sexuality from there. I am certainly not yet able to do so and I find myself quite wordless around this very sacred area. But I do feel that we have to move beyond pointing to the many weaknesses and failures in living a credible sexual ethic to a rediscovery of the deep meaning of the "vacare Deo." ["to be empty for God"]"

Henri was not the first to question my sense of mystery. Catherine de Hueck thought that my presentations during a retreat I gave at Madonna House -- a Catholic lay community of men -- in 1961 were "overly psychological." But my guide has always been grounded in Aquinas' dictum that "grace builds on nature" and the patristic pronouncement: "The glory of God is man fully human."

Henri and I never got a chance to have those conversations.

It takes nothing away from Henri's insights when I say the church is suffering its present sexual/celibate crisis precisely because it has not tolerated enough talk about the mental-emotional-sexual dimensions of celibacy.

So many sexual abusers have words for the spiritual, the mysterious, and the *mystagogic* dimensions of

celibacy. But they do not practice celibacy. They cannot tolerate the examination of the reality of their humanity, sexuality or behavior. Much of their talk about mystery sounds good and can be useful in the mental gyrations necessary for a man or woman to wrestle with -- as Fr. Robert Barron put it in 1999 -- the "unreasonable, unnatural, and excessive" expression of love that religious celibacy is meant to be.

Many churchmen deem it unseemly, ill mannered, even voyeuristic, to talk about the sexual practices of bishops and priests. Only when transparency and accountability become realities will we be able to *move beyond* talking about failures, as Henri wanted me to do.

In fact, facing the hard truth about his humanity and sexuality is exactly what Henri had to do in his depression. His psychological agony and struggle were proof of his celibate journey.

Henri died before he found his way with words around what he called "this very sacred area." But he and Merton helped define the territory that needs to be excavated if celibacy is to be understood and practiced -- the emotions of loneliness, deprivation, and loss.

Celibacy is a process. If it is pretense it is hypocrisy -- the gravest religious sin.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was an astute observer of clerical vice -- and virtue and with authority could write that -- as written in the Custom House Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* -- the person "who seemed the most righteous might prove the greatest sinner."

The crisis of abuse of minors by bishops and priests is the key that is opening the door to the reality of celibate practice. This is where the true mystery will be revealed -- truth and facts.

Henri ended his letter to me with a kind endorsement:

"I, personally, feel that you have a great vocation in this area, especially since you are so articulate and well-informed about the many facts and figures of the issues involved. You have important things to say and I have the feeling that rediscovering or reliving the mystical dimension of the sexual life may help you and me and all of us to grow to a reclaiming of life's [sic] sacredness.

I approach the burning bush of religious celibacy with my sandals in hand and with a sense of vocation. I have a sense of the mystery of sexuality/celibacy, but I also know that we have to build on the solid ground of reality -- the mental, emotional, and sexual dimensions of celibate process and practice.

[Richard Sipe is a mental health counselor and author who earlier spent 18 years as a Benedictine monk and priest.]

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