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Henri Nouwen's Spirituality of Peace

John Dear | Oct. 17, 2006 On the Road to Peace

Sept. 21 marked the 10th anniversary of the death of Henri Nouwen, one of our most popular writers on the spiritual life. A man of prodigious output, he produced a sweeping catalog of books, including such titles as *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit*, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*; and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. One might surmise that here was a strict ponderer of the inner life. Or a guide to navigating one's private relationship with God. But Henri's thinking surged beyond such narrow channels. Few realize the full spectrum of his spirituality.

Not that he didn't leave us a clue or two. The first emerges in his knack for walking away from positions of prestige. Quite an auspicious beginning for Henri -- teaching assignments at Notre Dame and then the divinity schools at Yale and Harvard. But he had a conscience, and it bothered him. He knew the Gospel summons toward "downward mobility," solidarity with the poor. And thus he slipped off the chains of the tenure track and spent some time casting about.

He spent time with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of Genesee and then in Peru living in a barrio. He settled finally at the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, where he cared for Adam, a community member with severe disabilities. In a booklet on peace, and then later in his posthumous book, *Adam*, he wrote about Adam's ministry of peacemaking, how Adam healed him and all those around him. In this great reversal, Henri became the student, the disciple.

I think Henri Nouwen walked the road to peace and over time developed a beautiful spirituality of nonviolence. Last year, *Peacework*, his masterpiece on the duty of disarmament, was finally published. There he lays out a path to peace for all of us. Henri wanted us to spend time in prayer, walk with Jesus, and love everyone on earth as our very sister and brother. "For Jesus," Henri wrote, "there are no countries to be conquered, no ideologies to be imposed, no people to be dominated. There are only children, women and men to be loved."

Henri and I began corresponding in the 1980s, as he did with thousands. Over time we became friends. In 1993, after I walked onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and hammered on a F-15 nuclear capable fighter bomber, to beat swords into plowshares as Isaiah advised, and landed in a North Carolina county jail for eight long months, Henri wrote lengthy letters of support and sent manuscripts, books and gifts.

How grateful I was for Henri's support. He did so much to buoy my spirits and sustain my clarity. And his support stood in sharp contrast to the harsh response my Plowshares action evoked among other church workers and theologians. His most moving gesture: his confiding that he wanted to connect his work at L'Arche with mine for peace.

Henri, it must be mentioned, built an opus of peace work in his own right. His was an inspiring journey, marked by a series of unusual and courageous steps. In the 1960s, he drove through the night to join Dr. King's march

from Selma to Montgomery. In the 1970s, he spoke at anti-war rallies and vigiled for peace at Connecticut's Trident submarine base. And there he hosted a weekly Mass for the protestors and taught them the spiritual roots of protest.

The passing of decades did little to incline him to slow down. In the 1980s, he joined hundreds of U.S. citizens on the border of Nicaragua and there protested Reagan's contra war. He traveled to Guatemala to support the priest who succeeded martyred Fr. Stanley Rother. Later, he toured the United States and called for "solidarity with our crucified sisters and brothers in Central America."

When the Berrigans were in jail, Henri went to visit. He traveled deep into Nevada to join the Franciscan anti-nuclear vigils at the Nevada Test Site. Later he went to Washington, D.C., on the eve of the first Gulf War and denounced it before a gathering of 10,000.

"As peacemakers, we must resist all the powers of war and destruction and proclaim that peace is the divine gift offered to all who affirm life. Resistance means saying 'No' to all the forces of death, wherever they may be."

"Saying 'No' is the Christian's solemn vocation," said Henri. "Just as Jesus' command to love one another cannot be seen as a part-time obligation ... so too Jesus' call to peacemaking is unconditional, unlimited, and uncompromising. None of us is excused! Peacemaking is a full-time vocation that includes each member of God's people."

Henri had a wide-ranging mind and wrote about peace from different angles. First, he said, peacemaking begins with prayer. "Prayer is the beginning and the end, the source and the fruit, the core and the content, the basis and the goal of all peacemaking." He taught that when we pray, we enter upon the presence of the God of peace, the one who disarms our hearts, who bestows on us the gift of peace.

This is where political peacemaking begins. The world teeters under nuclear weapons and rampant poverty and war, and they enrage and overwhelm and disorient us. All the more reason, Henri taught, to root our lives in contemplative peace. There God transforms us and deploys us to help disarm the world. In prayer we learn how to love even our enemies.

Next, he said, peacemaking begins and ends with Jesus. Jesus embodies peace, makes peace, shares peace and blesses peacemakers. We must, therefore, become more and more like him -- ourselves embodying peace, creating peace, sharing peace. "Keep your eyes on the Prince of Peace," Henri urged. One does that, he said, by focusing on Jesus, knowing him in our prayer, studying his life in the gospel. And from there will unfold our happy mission -- to carry on the works of love that he began.

Thus Henri's spirituality was a far cry from a private affair. He understood spirituality as social, political. God sends us out into the world of war to love and serve the whole human race -- even those labeled as our enemies -- with compassion, care and concern. In that light, work for disarmament and justice are not musty relics of the '60s. Nor are they the province of a few disenfranchised church people. They are integral to the life of every authentic Christian.

"Nobody can be a Christian today without being a peacemaker," Henri wrote in *Peacework*. "The bombing of Hiroshima and the nuclear arms race that followed have made peacemaking the central task for Christians. There are many other urgent tasks to accomplish -- the work of worship, evangelization, healing of church divisions, alleviating worldwide poverty and hunger, and defending human rights. But all of these tasks are closely connected with the task that stands above them all: making peace. Making peace today means giving a future to humanity, making it possible to continue our life together on this planet."

Finally, Henri's spirituality of peace centered on a simple matter -- our sense of "belovedness." We are the

beloved sons and daughters of God, he taught over and over. The more we become aware of this our true nature, the more we plumb this spiritual understanding of life, the more we will reach out in love for every human on the planet. Because we are God's beloved children, we will recognize every other human being as our beloved sister or brother. When we manage that, the business of death will fall: war, poverty, injustice, nuclear weapons. All will live in God's realm of peace.

" 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' " said Henri, "are the key words for Christians today."

A longer version of this reflection is featured in the new book, *Remembering Henri* edited by Gerald Twomey and Claude Pomerleau available from Orbis Books. See also *The Road to Peace: Writings on Peace and Justice* by Henri Nouwen edited by John Dear, and *Peacework* by Henri Nouwen, with a foreword by John Dear, both available from Orbis. For further info, see: www.fatherjohndear.org [1].

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