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Theology and Experience: A Complete Bibliography on Henri Nouwen

by Robert Durback

Dermot Lane has put his hand on the pulse of our time when he states that: "One of the most significant developments in Christian theology in this century has been the recovery of experience as an integral element in the exercise of theology" (*The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology*, Paulist Press, 1981). If I begin the study of a Dutch theologian with a quote from an Irish theologian, it is because the trend announced by the one is so strikingly manifest in the work of the other. In fact I might begin by recommending that one begin or conclude a study of Henri Nouwen by reading Lane's book, so as to appreciate better the dynamic at work throughout the writings of the former. Lamenting the rift between doctrine and experience evident in Catholic theology during the first half of this century, Lane concludes: "If doctrine is not related to human experience it will inevitably become marginal in the lives of believers" (pg. 21). If Nouwen's books proclaim anything, it is the wedding between doctrine and human experience.

In an interview published in the summer of 1978 in *Critic* magazine (Thomas More, Chicago), Nouwen describes the unique approach which has made him the much sought after lecturer and writer he has become:

"I have always used as my prime resource some of my own observations and my own personal struggles with whatever I am writing about. This is because I have always believed that one of the main objectives of ministry is to make your own faith struggles available to others, to articulate for others your own doubts, and to say, in effect, 'I don't know the answers either. I am simply a catalyst, simply somebody who wants to articulate for you things that you already know but might get a better grip on if there are some words for them.' Later I might discuss with my associates and friends what other writers may have said about these things, but I think that my strength has always been starting from the shore of personal experience."

It may be argued that such an emphasis on personal experience would tend to be restrictive, running the risk of a subjectivism which could well narrow the field of interest of others with very different experiences. Nouwen averted to this possibility early in his writings when preparing a book on prayer:

"... I thought I could hardly write about prayer before I had asked the question: 'What is it that I myself find in prayer?' I came to see that praying had something to do with silence, with acceptance, with hope, with compassion, and even with revolution. Then I carefully sought out concepts and images which expressed what I had experienced or would have liked to experience" (*With Open Hands*, pg. 7).

Robert Durback, who was a Trappist monk at Gethsemani Abbey during the Merton era, is now a letter carrier in Cleveland.

He then proceeds to face squarely the "subjectivity" objection:

"But what does this have to do with anyone else? Aren't my own experiences so personal that they might just as well remain hidden? Or could it be that what is most personal for me, what rings true to the depths of my being, also has meaning for others? *Ultimately, I believe that what is most personal is also the most universal.*" [Italics my own.]

In that final statement Nouwen lays the foundation on which will rest the structure of his subsequent theological reflection. Perceptively, he qualifies the principle: "To arrive at this point, however, friends are necessary, for they are the ones who help you distinguish between superficial sensations and deep human experiences." One need only glance at the "acknowledgments" pages in any of Nouwen's books to glimpse the sweep of resources he draws on from a vast array of friends and acquaintances from all walks of life.

It might be appropriate at this point to call attention to the fact that friends and personal experience are not the sole source of Nouwen's psychological and pastoral expertise. Ordained to the priesthood in 1957 in his native Holland, he went on to study psychology at the University of Nijmegen. Later he became a fellow in the Program of Religion and Psychiatry at the Menninger Foundation (1964-66), and then visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame. Most recently he completed ten years at Yale Divinity School, serving first as associate professor and finally as full professor of pastoral theology.

Those who have followed Nouwen's career and the people-oriented thrust of his pastoral approach should not be too surprised that his academic career climaxed in 1981 with a decision to resign from his tenure at Yale to work directly with the poor in Latin America. At this writing he is presently under an agreement with Harvard University which gives him loose ties with that academic base in the U.S., while leaving him free to work in Latin America for the greater part of the year. To the joy and deep satisfaction of his readers, the entire journey from lecture hall to university, to monastic retreat, to barrio, has been charted in the steady stream of books that have come forth from the pen of this articulate and very mobile professor. In the annotated bibliography which follows we will take a bird's eye view of the content of each of his works in the order of publication. Asterisks indicate four best selling books.

Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays (Fides, 1969; Harper & Row, 1981, pp. ix + 150, pb., \$5.95.) *Genesis Experience*. Intimacy is the result of two years at Notre Dame (1966-68) in which Nouwen responds to the many questions put to him by his students and friends on campus. The questions seemed to boil down to a single basic question: "How can I find a creative and fulfilling intimacy in my relationship with God and my fellow man?" Seven essays grouped under four headings: Intimacy & Sexuality. Intimacy & Prayer. Intimacy & Community. Intimacy & the Ministry.

Creative Ministry: Beyond Professionalism in Teaching, Preaching, Counseling, Organizing, and Celebrating (Doubleday, 1971, pp. xxiv + 123, pb., \$3.50.) *Experiencing New Challenges in Ministry*. Explores the relationship between professionalism and spirituality in pastoral ministry. Nouwen's basic thesis: Unlike other professions, ministry is not an eight-to-five job, but primarily a way of life for others to see and understand so that liberation can become a possibility.

***With Open Hands** (Trans. from the Dutch, *Met Open Handen*, by P. Gafney. Ave Maria, 1972, pp. 160, pb., \$2.95.) *Experiencing Prayer*. With the aid of photographer friends Nouwen describes the movement of prayer as movement from clenched fists to open hands. (Cf. *Intro.* above.)

Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic (Formerly *Pray To Live*, Fides 1972; Harper & Row, 1981, pp. x + 158, pb., \$4.95.) *Merton Experience*. In this introduction to the life and thought of Thomas Merton, Nouwen explains: "I met him only once at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Yet thereafter, his person and work had such an impact on me that his sudden death stirred me as if it were the death of one of my closest friends. It therefore seems natural for me to write for others about the man who has inspired me most in recent years."

***The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society** (Doubleday, 1972, pp. xiv + 104, pb., \$2.95.) *Experiencing a Dislocated World*. What does it mean to be a minister in our contemporary society where men and women who want to be of service find the familiar ways crumbling and traditional protections vanishing? Nouwen addresses the question: "After all attempts to articulate the predicament of modern man, the necessity to articulate the predicament of the minister himself becomes most important. For the minister is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service."

Aging: The Fulfillment of Life Co-authored with Walter Gaffney. (Doubleday, 1974, pp. 160, pb., \$3.50.) *Experiencing the Aging Process*. The elderly are our prophets. They remind us that what we see so clearly in them is a process in which we all share. Grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren—they all make the whole of our life cycle visible and tangible to us at every moment of our lives. The elderly are our teachers who tell us about the dangers as well as the possibilities in becoming old. (Available on cassette, Ave Maria.)

Out Of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life (Ave Maria, 1974, pp. 63, pb., \$1.95.) *Experiencing Tension: Solitude vs. Social Action*. Drawing on three biblical texts, the author reflects on the two poles between which the Christian life is constantly held in tension: solitary prayer and active ministry. His thesis: Care and ministry, to bear fruit worthy of the name Christian, must be born out of solitude, i.e., a deep, personal involvement with the living God.

***Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life** (Doubleday, 1975, pp. 120, cl., \$8.95.) *Experiencing the Inner Search*. Nouwen himself gives his own unique evaluation of one of his best selling books: "... This book is closer to me than anything I have written and tries to articulate my most personal thought and feelings about being a Christian." An excellent retreat companion. (Available on cassette, Thomas More.)

***Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery** (Doubleday, 1976, pp. xiv + 199, pb., \$3.95.) *Experiencing Monastic Life*. Taking advantage of a sabbatical, the author, by special arrangement with the Trappist monks of Genesee Abbey in upstate New York, spends seven months in seclusion at the abbey. Living the day-to-day monastic routine as a fully integrated, if temporary, member of the community provides him with a unique opportunity to probe his own life as a busy lecturer, writer, and university professor in contrast with the slower-paced lifestyle of the monks. A special treat for anyone interested in what goes on inside monasteries—or better, what goes on inside people inside monasteries.

The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ (Seabury, 1977, pp. 80, pb., \$4.95.) *Integrating Experience: Ministry and Spirituality*. "What are the spiritual resources of ministers? What prevents them from becoming dull, sullen, lukewarm bureaucrats, people who have many projects, plans, and appointments, but who have lost their heart somewhere in the midst of their activities? What keeps ministers vital, alive, energetic and full of zeal?" These are the questions of this book.

Clowning In Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation (Doubleday Image, 1979, pp. 110, pb., \$4.50.) *Foolish Experience*. Four lectures originally given during a five-month stay in Rome. Why "clowning" in Rome? Nouwen explains: "Of the virtuosi we say, 'How do they do it?' Of the clowns we say, 'They are like us.' The clowns remind us . . . that we share the same human weaknesses." The clown is a "powerful image to help us understand the role of the minister in contemporary society." Playing the clown, Nouwen explores four "clownlike" or "foolish" elements in the spiritual life: being alone, treasuring emptiness, standing naked before God, and simply seeing things for what they are." (Available on cassette, Thomas More.)

In Memoriam (Ave Maria, 1980, pp. 62, pb., \$2.50.) *Experiencing Death*. A moving account of the sudden illness and subsequent death of his mother, whose first symptoms of cancer are discovered during a family visit with the author at Yale in the fall of 1978. Though Nouwen's reflections on the way he experienced his mother's death were intended originally for his own and his family's cherished remembrance, copies circulated among close friends eventually led to pleas for publication. Yielding, Nouwen notes in his introduction: "In life she belonged to a few; in death she is for all." A precious legacy. And a priceless tool for ministering to the bereaved.

The Way Of The Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry (Seabury, 1981, pp. 96, cl., \$7.95, pb., \$2.50.) *Desert Experience*. A contemporary rereading of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Focusing on the threefold command to Abba Arsenius, "Flee! Be silent! Pray!", Nouwen pursues the implications for contemporary ministers of early Christian teaching on the fundamental role of the three disciplines of solitude, silence, and unceasing prayer. (Available on cassette, Thomas More.)

Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life (Harper & Row, 1981, pp. 96, cl., \$8.25.) *Responding to the Inexperienced*. "What do you mean when you speak about the spiritual life?" Nouwen responds to a frequently asked question in this small and very readable volume which explores the basics of Christian spirituality.

A Cry For Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee (Doubleday, 1981, pp. 175, cl., \$10.95, pb., \$5.95.) *Experiencing Monastic Prayer*. Returning to the Abbey of the Genesee for a second stay of seven months (Cf. *Genesee Diary*, above), Nouwen tries a new experiment: instead of keeping a diary, he writes a prayer each day. A sample concludes this bibliography.

Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life (Doubleday, 1982, pp. xii + 142, cl., \$12.95.) *Experiencing Solidarity*. With coauthors Donald P. McNeill and Douglas A. Morrison, Nouwen explores the unique role of compassion in the Christian life. At first sight compassion seems to be a natural, instinctive, human response to other's pain and suffering. But on closer inspection the authors conclude that for the Christian true compassion is born only out of prayerful reflection on the implications of the Incarnation and the demands it makes on all who would follow in the footsteps of the Man of Sorrows. A creative, insightful exploration of a timely topic in a world sensitized to violation of human rights, hunger, and oppression. (Available on cassette, Thomas More.)

A Letter Of Consolation (Harper and Row, 1982, pp. 96, cl., \$6.95.) *Experiencing Grief*. A companion volume to be read in sequence to *In Memoriam*. Six months after the death of his mother, during his second protracted stay at the Trappist Abbey of the Genesee, Nouwen found himself deeply in touch with his own grief over the loss of his mother. He wanted to share his feelings with someone "who could really understand what was happening inside me. And who could better understand me than my own father?" The result: *A Letter of Consolation*. Originally a strictly personal letter, the published text was the inevitable result of the urgings of friends. A deeply moving account, and, like *In Memoriam*, a healing gift to the bereaved.

Gracias! A Latin American Journal (Harper & Row, 1983, pp. xiv + 188, cl., \$12.95.) *Conversion Experience: Identifying with the Poor*. *Gracias* should be read after *Compassion*, and *Compassion* should be read after *Gracias*. In *Compassion* Nouwen theorizes about the compassionate life. In *Gracias* he lives it. Stepping down from ten years as Professor of Pastoral Theology at Yale in July of 1981, Nouwen promptly embarked on a plan which had been taking shape in his mind as his academic career headed toward its climax: to work among the poor in the barrios of Lima. *Gracias* chronicles his day-to-day experiences in his Third World parish. Challenging reading!

It seems fitting that we conclude with a final quote from the author which would tie the many strands together in a unity. I think the following quote from *A Cry For Mercy* serves the purpose well. Reflecting on the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well, Nouwen prays:

"The water that you give turns into a spring. Therefore, I do not have to be stingy with your gift, O Lord. I can freely let the water come from my center and let anyone who desires drink from it. Perhaps I will even see this spring in myself when others come to it to quench their thirst. So often, Lord, I doubt that there is a spring in me; so often I am afraid that it has dried up or has been filled with sand. But others keep believing in the spring in me even when I do not."

Let those who thirst come to the spring.