

# WHO IS HENRI NOUWEN

*"The deeper you enter into communion with God, the more you understand who your neighbor is. The life of communion with God in no way takes you away from the world, but living with Christ at the center, you radiate the Truth of Christ." -Henri Nouwen*

By age 6, Henri Josef Machiel Nouwen knew what he wanted to be when he grew up – a priest. Growing up in a strongly religious Catholic home in Holland, this is perhaps not surprising. But where his childhood calling would lead him is truly remarkable.

Nouwen was born in 1932 to Laurent, a strict father with high expectations, and Maria, a devoted mother with a love for books and spiritual life. Ordained in 1957, he graduated as a psychologist six years later and then moved to the US for a psychology and theology fellowship. This led to 20 years climbing the academic ladder of success at Notre Dame, Yale and, after half a year serving the poor in South America, teaching as a Professor of Divinity at Harvard. His accomplishments as a teacher and speaker were only overshadowed by his immense popularity as an author, writing more than 40 books including "The Wounded Healer," "Return of the Prodigal Son" and "The Life of the Beloved."

In 1985, Nouwen was spiritually dry from decades of the competitive politics of academia, a growing readership and the stresses of ministry. "Everyone

was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger," he wrote in "In the Name of Jesus." It was time to get back to the ministerial heart of that little boy in the Netherlands.

After nine months in France learning about the international L'Arche community for the mentally disabled, he became a live-in assistant at L'Arche's Daybreak community in Ontario, Canada.

"Since nobody could read my books, the books could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my 20 years at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable," he wrote in "In the Name of Jesus."

He was assigned to care for Adam Arnett, a severely physically and mentally disabled young man. Arnett could neither speak nor move in his wheelchair without help and experienced terrible seizures. Nouwen, accustomed to life as a renowned author and distinguished university professor, was at a loss for how to communicate with his new charge, much less complete Arnett's long, tedious morning routine to get ready for the day. The teacher became the student as Nouwen was forced to slow down from his busy schedule, learning patience, endurance and strength from Arnett's silent example.

Despite 14 months of spiritual renewal and growth as Arnett's assistant, Nouwen found himself battling anxiety, depression and other lingering deep emotional wounds including grief over his mother's death from cancer and the aftermath of a disbanded friendship. "I found myself overwhelmed by intense feelings of abandonment, rejection, neediness, dependence, despair. Here I was in the most peaceful house, with the most peaceful people, but raging inside myself," he wrote in "Adam: God's Beloved," his last book about his time with Arnett.

Though he took time away from Daybreak to heal, he returned to the community as a pastor for another decade of ministry. He often brought a disabled Daybreak member with him as he traveled to speaking engagements, building bridges between the privileged and the marginalized.

Though most will undoubtedly remember Nouwen for his prolific books and accomplishments, perhaps his great spiritual influence on modern Christianity was the example he set outside of the spotlight: his simple conviction to live as a servant among the "least of these," acting honestly upon the words he had studied, spoken and written for so long.

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