

Rolheiser: A Saint for Our Time

It is not enough today to be merely a saint; we must have a saintliness demanded by the present moment.

Simone Weil wrote that, and she is right. We need saints demanded by the present moment and I would like to propose someone whom, I believe, fits that description, Henri Nouwen, the priest and popular spiritual writer who died in 1996. What was his saintliness and why is it particularly apropos in terms of the present moment?

Henri Nouwen is arguably the most influential spirituality writer of our generation. However, his spirituality was not born out of an easy temperament nor an untested faith. As Michael Higgins writes in his biography of Nouwen, his was a “genius born of anguish”. Nouwen was a saint wracked with anxiety, an ideal patron for a generation awash with it.

He was a complex, anguished, anxious person with a hypersensitive personality. He was prone to obsessiveness in his intimate relationships, occasionally manifested a neediness that was more childish than childlike and was forever haunted by the sense that (despite all the love, acceptance, and success he experienced) he was not really loved, and no place was home for him. As well, he nursed a wound inside that he could never explain to others nor make peace with himself. Coupled with all this, he had an artistic temperament (with both its gifts and its burdens) and, like many artists, had to struggle to remain robust, normal, and balanced in the creative process, enjoy a down-to-earth sanity, and keep his sexuality within the bounds of his vows. Thus, he could go out on a stage, radiate a powerful energy, and then step off the stage and within minutes break down in tears and beg someone to console him. In terms of his sexuality, though he was a vowed celibate who remained faithful to his vows, occasionally he would fall in love so obsessively with someone that he was able to keep his vows and his sanity only by checking himself into a clinic for professional help.

This isn't the stuff you normally read in the lives of saints, at least of those who are officially canonized and held up as models of sanctity; but that is in fact the stuff of saintliness. Soren Kierkegaard, whom Henri idealized, defined a saint this way: *a saint is someone who can will the one thing*. Not an easy task. Not because the right thing is hard to will, but because we also will many other things. Thomas Aquinas affirmed that every choice is a renunciation. That's an understatement. Every choice is a series of renunciations, and that makes both choosing and saintliness difficult.

Writing his diaries, Nouwen describes his struggle in this way: *I want to be a great saint, but I also want to experience all the sensations that sinners experience. I want to withdraw into the silence of prayer, but I don't want to*

miss anything happening in the world. I want to bury myself in anonymity among the poor, but I also want to write books, be known by others, see places, meet people, and do interesting things. That's what he wrestled with, just as we all do, but he managed, in the end, to will the one thing.

How did he do it, how did he become a saint despite it all? He did it through a humble honesty that never denied his struggles. He did it by accepting his own complexity, by falling to his knees in prayers of helplessness when his own strength wasn't enough, and by letting the poor love him. And he did it by sharing his wounds with the world, by seeking professional help whenever he broke down, and by learning from all the pain, obsessiveness, and heartache that, in the end, our hearts are stronger than our wounds; because of that we can keep our commitments and ultimately find peace inside of complexity, temptation, and struggle.

The saints of old, no doubt, had their own struggles in trying to will the one thing, to healthily channel their wild energies and give themselves over to God. However, the stories we hear of their lives tend to highlight more their virtue than their struggle. For example, Mother Teresa is also a saint from our generation, and a very inspirational one at that. For many of us, her life and her virtue seem so far removed from our own earthy and messy struggles that *we look at her as a saint we can admire but not quite imitate.* That's unfair of course. She also had her struggles, mammoth ones. Still, it is not her struggles that are generally highlighted when her story is told.

Henri Nouwen's story and his writings highlight his struggles, not just his virtue and wisdom. Knowing the earthiness of his struggles can give the impression that there is less in him to admire than in someone like Mother Teresa. Perhaps. But, in Nouwen we see someone we can more easily imitate.