

FEATURE

Dutch biography offers taste of Henri Nouwen

Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking for God, by Jurjen Beumer. Crossroad (New York, 1997). 190 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by William Droel
Catholic News Service

Father Henri Nouwen is arguably most popular Catholic spiritual writer in the post-Vatican II era. The latest edition of Books In Print lists 61 titles by him, including two published since his sudden death in September 1996. Jurjen Beumer's biography, *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking for God*, is an appreciation of Father Nouwen centered on this mound of writing. It was published last year in Dutch and then translated by David Schlaver and Nancy Forest Flier.

Father Nouwen, who attended the Second Vatican Council, was a pioneer in what has since been called "pastoral theology." He gave practical relevance to theological themes like grace, vocation, incarnation, spirituality and more. He was able to broker insights from psychology with the Christian tradition. He was able to filter one scriptural image after another through his experience, inviting his readers to use the Bible in that way — something new for most Catholics. This whole field of pastoral theology was refreshing to priests educated before-Vatican II and to women religious and lay people engaged in ministry.

In contrast to his personal restlessness, Father Nouwen's genius was to stay with a concept long enough to uncover interest-

ing paradoxes. For example, he wrote: "We have to learn how to pray while we can only receive it as a gift." Or, something like: Prayer brings us closer to God's absence until we appreciate that "God's absence is never separated from his presence."

As Beumer acknowledges, anyone so prolific as Father Nouwen is also repetitious. Indeed, it often seems as though he has the story line in his computer long before he's had the experience itself.

Beumer, in addition to outlining several of Father Nouwen's main themes, provides a clear chronology of his life, from his 1957 ordination for the Archdiocese of Utrecht, Netherlands, through his years at Yale Divinity School to his final ministry at Daybreak, a community for special children and young adults in Toronto.

Beumer admits this is a friendly biography. Several areas of Father Nouwen's life are left unexplored. What was his relationship with his home diocese? What were the circumstances under which Yale granted him tenure, even though he was away from campus at least five of his 10 years there? What was involved in Father Nouwen's moments of "deep depression?"

Perhaps a fuller picture of Father Nouwen will emerge in other biographies that Beumer says are on the way. For now, Beumer's concise introduction to the life and thought of Father Henri Nouwen may entice some people to revisit a spiritual writer they met 20 or more years ago.

Droel, a former Rochesterian, is an instructor and campus minister at Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, Ill.



CNS/Prima Publishing

Cybermonk

Brother John Raymond, author of *Catholics on the Internet*, a 400-page guide to Catholic resources, said links to religious resources are "unbelievable," but users should be cautious. The book is available from Prima Publishing, P.O. Box 1260BK, Rocklin, CA 95677, 916/632-4400.

Priest provides portraits, own assessments of popes

Lives of the Popes: The pontiffs from St. Peter to John Paul II, by Father Richard P. McBrien. HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, 1997). 386 pp., \$29.50.

Reviewed by Father John T. Ford
Catholic News Service

Reading Father Richard McBrien's *Lives of the Popes* is like paging through a family genealogy: among the 262 pontiffs — from St. Peter to Pope John Paul II — one discovers both the saintly and the sinful, the intelligent and the inept, the prophetic and the problematic. If the personal lives of the popes are not always edifying, this portrayal of their lives is ever interesting.

These papal portraits vary in size. Sometimes the accounts are only a paragraph in length, as is frequently the case of the popes who lived during times of persecution; in the early centuries of the church, election to the papacy was often tantamount to selection for martyrdom.

At other times the accounts are short because the pontificate was brief. For example, Urban VII was pope at the end of the 16th century for a mere dozen days.

Father McBrien also takes the risk of "rating the popes. Only two pontiffs make his list of "outstanding popes" — Gregory

the Great (590-604) and John XXIII (1958-63). His list of "good, or above average, popes" is longer, but still has only a dozen names, including Paul VI (1963-78). John Paul II rates "historically important."

Twenty-three popes are included on Father McBrien's list of the "worst" popes. Few historians would disagree that Alexander VI (1492-1503) deserves to be described as the "most notorious pope in history" on account of his immorality, but one might question whether Gregory XVI (1831-46) deserves to be on the same list because of his conservative policies.

Father McBrien also provides a list of papal "firsts" and "lasts" suitable for testing one's detailed knowledge about the papacy.

One appendix contains information about how popes are elected, along with a summary of the new procedures promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1996. Another appendix describes how 26 popes have been removed from office.

Readers may not always agree with his conclusions, but they will certainly find this book filled with fascinating facts and thought-provoking questions.

Holy Cross Father Ford is a professor of theology at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

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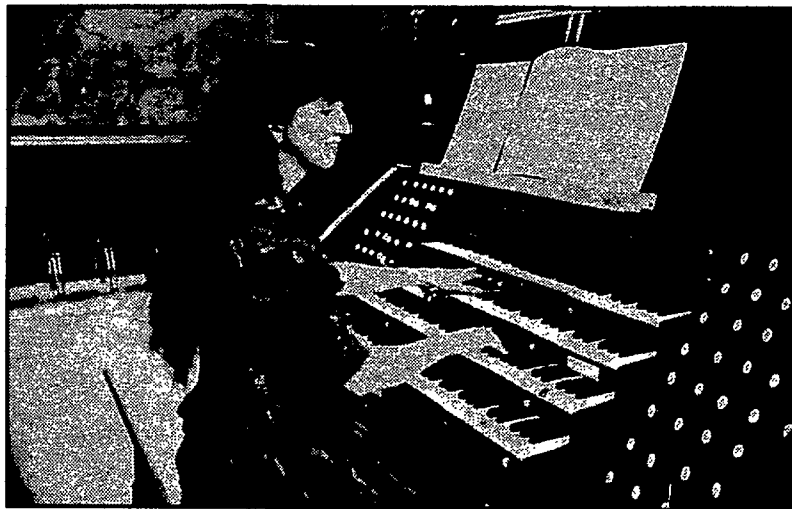
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