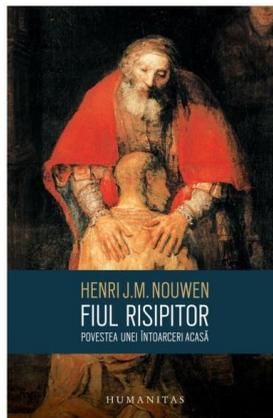


The Return of the Prodigal Son. A Lesson of Life Through Faith and Art

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Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Humanitas Publishing House from Bucharest, 2017, 194 pp



The reader who is searching for a good book which can easily charm one's soul can actually stop now over the work of Henri J. M. Nouwen, called *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, edited in the Romanian language in 2017 by Humanitas Publishing House from Bucharest. Over these 194 written pages, written in an original and fluent style, combining the rigours of a text which can easily be placed both in bibliographies with a religious specificity and in the ones that belong to the artistic field, the book of Henri J. M. Nouwen is focused on the description of some experiences lived by the author of the work himself, after visualizing and discovering the meanings of the work *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, painted around the year 1668 by the well-known Dutch artist Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669).

Based on the deep meanings of the Biblical parable in which the old father receives his prodigal son with so much joy, after having considered him lost for a long time, the impressive creation of Rembrandt had an unusual effect on Father Henri J. M. Nouwen who was in a sensitive moment of his lifetime. The accidental discovery of a poster of the famous painting determines him to find the hidden message that the work transmits, thus making a journey to Hermitage Museum from Sankt Petersburg, where he would effectively meet the masterpiece. The work awakens feelings and inner sensations to the unusual visitor, marking the beginning of a spiritual trajectory of analysis and introspection, finally offering him a superior perspective of comprehension and of living his own life. This is the key moment for understanding his entire spiritual way, consisting in the successive identification with each of the main characters of the painting. Moreover, the structure of the book which describes this impressive spiritual endeavour reflects, through its three parts, the empathy of the author who puts himself in the position of each of these characters: the younger son, the elder son and the father.

The description of this experience has the defining features of an initiation ritual which is difficult and long-lasting, in which the passing through each phase represents an existential condition, impossible to avoid or to substitute. Deep and honest introspection makes the author pass through the three stages of his accomplishment as a human being, a recurrent theme of universal literature which is old or more recent. By reading these pages several times, the reader repeatedly has the possibility to experience a feeling similar to the one while reading the novel *Laurus*, of the Russian writer Evgenij Vodolazkin, this work also appeared in Romanian in 2012, at "Humanitas" Publishing House. Just like the main character of this book, Arseny, slowly transforms himself into Ambroglio, afterwards in *Laurus*, by passing through a series of defining ontological hypostases, sketched in the four parts of the work (*The Book of Knowledge*, *The Book of Giving Up*, *The Book of the Path* and *The Book of Serenity*), Henri J. M. Nouwen himself passes through a process of transfiguration, passing from the age of the childhood of consciousness (the one of the prodigal son) to the one of full maturity, illustrated by the image of the father, the mundane expression of the goodness and wiseness of God.

The elaborated consciousness process that Henri J. M. Nouwen lives and describes in the pages of this book is connected in a specific way to the discovery of the meaning of life that he finds in the living of life itself, while giving up on the inner, interior child and while symbolically identifying oneself with the person of the old father of the Biblical parable and from the painting of Rembrandt.

The book represents, on the whole, a suggestive questioning of the problem of human identity, delicately exploring the territory of memory, consciousness and spirit. The reading of this work incites to launching a set of questions that both the author and the reader address themselves: Who are we, at a deep level? Are we only just the person that has reached a specific phase of life, or are we, simultaneously, the amount of all our passing identities, of the moments and experiences that we have lived up to the present moment, during our entire lifetime? Or...Can we simultaneously be both the image of the prodigal son and of the forgiving father? The answers to these questions and the identification with the father can be found by following three paths, described by the author as it follows: sadness, forgiveness and open-heartedness. These are the spiritual terms of reference of the initiation path that the painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* made by Rembrandt symbolically marks not only for the writer of this captivating book, but also for the large public. In a nutshell, we can state that we are in front of an obvious proof of the way in which art can change thoughts, ideals, characters and finally, destinies.