EMBRACING VULNERABILITY AS KENOSIS IN HENRI NOUWEN'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY AND ITS RESONANCE WITH IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

MERANGKUL KERENTANAN SEBAGAI KENOSIS DALAM PERJALANAN SPIRITUAL HENRI NOUWEN DAN RESONANSINYA DENGAN SPIRITUALITAS IGNASIAN

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana teologi kerentanan menurut Henri Nouwen, yang berakar pada pergulatan pribadi dan pengalaman pastoralnya, merekonstruksi kembali kenosis Kristus (pengosongan diri) sebagai praktik spiritual yang transformatif. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kemiripan antara perjalanan spiritual Nouwen dan prinsip-prinsip spiritualitas Ignasian, khususnya Latihan Rohani St. Ignatius Loyola. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kepustakaan kualitatif, artikel ini menganalisis tulisan-tulisan otobiografi Nouwen dan teks-teks Ignasian secara komparatif dan hermeneutik untuk menyoroti persamaan dan perbedaannya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun Nouwen tidak secara langsung dibentuk oleh spiritualitas Ignasian, pendekatannya terhadap discernment, refleksi harian, dan pendampingan dalam kerapuhan secara alami selaras dengan tema-tema Ignasian. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa merangkul kerentanan sebagai kenosis tidak hanya memperdalam pertumbuhan spiritual pribadi, tetapi juga menawarkan model pastoral yang tangguh di konteks dunia kontemporer. Sintesis ini memperkaya pemahaman formasi Kristiani, menekankan bahwa kerapuhan manusia dapat menjadi ruang sakral untuk berjumpa dengan Allah dan membangun komunitas yang otentik.

Kata kunci: *Henri Nouwen, latihan rohani, kenosis, kerentanan, spiritualitas Ignasian, teologi pastoral*

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Henri Nouwen's theology of vulnerability, grounded in his personal struggles and pastoral experiences, reinterprets Christ's kenosis (self-emptying) as a transformative spiritual practice. The study aims to analyze the resonance between Nouwen's spiritual journey and the principles of Ignatian spirituality, particularly the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. Employing a qualitative literature research method, the article draws on Nouwen's autobiographical writings and key Ignatian texts, using comparative and hermeneutic analysis to highlight both similarities and distinctions. The results show that while Nouwen was not directly shaped by Ignatian spirituality, his approach to discernment, daily reflection, and accompaniment in weakness naturally aligns with Ignatian themes. The article concludes that embracing vulnerability as kenosis not only deepens personal spiritual growth

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but also offers a resilient model for pastoral ministry in contemporary contexts. This synthesis deepens our understanding of Christian formation, highlighting that human fragility can be a sacred space for encountering God and fostering authentic community.

Keywords: Henri Nouwen, Ignatian spirituality, kenosis, pastoral theology, spiritual exercises, vulnerability

1. INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability is a universal human experience that transcends age, gender, and circumstance. Each of us can experience vulnerability due to various factors and situations, such as personal struggles, discrimination, or the loss of someone loved. Some experience vulnerable lives because of chronic illness, domestic violence, a loved one dying, friendships ending painfully, and many other reasons. It can happen to everyone, from men, women, and children to older people and those with disabilities. Some people usually see vulnerability as a weakness that needs to be overcome. However, Christian spirituality, primarily through the lens of Christ's kenosis (self-emptying), encourages a radical rethinking of vulnerability as a pathway to encounter God.

Christians are fortunate to have the figure of Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), a Dutch diocesan priest and renowned spiritual writer. Nouwen bravely shares his experiences and reflections on his vulnerable moments as part of his life story as a human being, even sometimes inviting us to engage in theological reflection (Jesuits Ireland, 2023). As a Catholic priest, professor, spiritual writer, and theologian, his reflections and thoughts in various books have helped Christians find their place and deepen their connection to God. The way he incorporates vulnerability into his spiritual practice is a crucial corrective to modern pastoral models that prioritize efficiency over empathy.

This article examines how Henri Nouwen's theology of vulnerability, rooted in his autobiographical challenges and pastoral work, reinterprets Christ's kenosis (self-emptying) as a transformative spiritual practice. This article proposes an integrated model of spiritual formation by synthesizing Nouwen’s insights with Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises framework, positioning human fragility as the sacred ground for divine encounters. Hopefully, this article also presents a pathway to resilience that profoundly aligns with modern pastoral challenges.

2. METHOD

This research uses qualitative research methodology, emphasizing comparative textual and hermeneutic analysis. The primary data include Henri Nouwen's autobiographical writings, particularly *Love, Henri; The Inner Voice of Love; Adam: God's Beloved; and The Road to Daybreak*, alongside significant Ignatian sources, especially the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. Relevant secondary literature and scholarly commentary on both Nouwen and Ignatian spirituality supplement these works.

The study is conducted in two primary phases. This study presents a thematic and hermeneutic analysis of Nouwen's texts, focusing on the theological motifs of vulnerability, kenosis (self-emptying), and spiritual accompaniment as they develop from his life narrative and pastoral experience. Secondly, it conducts a comparative analysis of Nouwen's experiential spirituality in relation to the principles of Ignatian discernment, *cura personalis*, and *magis,* as defined within the Ignatian tradition. This involves analyzing areas of agreement and disagreement, along with contextual implications for educational and pastoral situations.

This approach is both argumentative and critical, engaging with primary texts as well as contemporary critiques of kenosis and vulnerability, which include concerns regarding passivity and the spiritualization of suffering. The method seeks to synthesize a model of spiritual formation that is theologically grounded and practically relevant for contemporary Christian ministry, particularly within Ignatian educational contexts, by integrating insights from both traditions.

2.1 Henri Nouwen's Autobiography: Transitioning from Academic Success to L'arche's Profound Hospitality

Henri J. M. Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, theologian, and writer. His well-off academic upbringing, which included a Ph.D. in psychology and teaching positions at Harvard and Yale, paradoxically prepared him for L'Arche's kenotic calling. After many years of teaching, Nouwen's decision to join the L'Arche community in 1985 exemplified Ignatius's principle of *agere contra* (acting against the ego) (Otto, 2020). By giving up worldly success to stand with those who are on the outside, Nouwen showed how to follow this principle.

His life and work have had a profound influence on spiritual literature and the Christian community. Nouwen explores themes of vulnerability and kenosis in his writings and personal experiences, highlighting how accepting human imperfections can lead to healing and spiritual growth. His thoughts on isolation, loneliness, and the quest for authenticity underscore the

importance of recognizing our limitations and our need for others and God to form meaningful connections.

Henri Jozef Machiel Nouwen was born on January 24, 1932, in Nijkerk, the Netherlands (University of Toronto Libraries, n.d.). He studied in Holland at the famous Catholic University of Nijmegen and was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Utrecht on July 21, 157. Interestingly, Henri lived his life primarily outside of the European continent (Ford, 2002). He traveled and taught at numerous institutions, including Harvard, Yale, and the University of Notre Dame (Higgins, 2007). Nouwen's formative years were marked by a period of great opportunity and privilege. During the German military occupation of the Netherlands, his family remained largely unharmed (Nouwen, 2016). He obtained his academic education in philosophy, theology, and psychology from distinguished educators in his home country and the United States. He has a passionate mind and an artist's perspective.

After becoming a priest in 1957, Nouwen studied psychology at the University of Nijmegen. He completed his two-year graduate training program in theology and psychiatric theory at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas. In this place, Nouwen distinguished himself as a leading figure in the realms of pastoral psychology and clinical pastoral education (Nouwen, 2016). Nouwen learned about broader political developments in the US. He became aware of the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. When he marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, he heard the voices of US peace movement protesters against nuclear weapons and conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War (p.4). Henri Nouwen's growing assurance and audacious blend of psychology with pastoral care started to capture his interest. He began teaching in the newly established psychology department at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. He accepted and taught courses there for two years, including Psychology of Religion, The Psychology of Personality, and Abnormal Psychology.

Nevertheless, Henri's ambitions were not directed toward the United States. He presumed he would return to Holland and reintegrate into Dutch society. After departing from Notre Dame in 1968, he returned home and taught at the Amsterdam Joint Pastoral Institute, followed by the Catholic Theological Institute in Utrecht. These institutions were established to incorporate psychology into pastoral education (Nouwen, 2016).

When Nouwen considered his doctoral options, Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, invited him to teach pastoral theology. Frustrated with the Dutch academic system, he accepted and returned to the United States in August 1971. Nouwen would never return to living in Holland after this (Nouwen, 2016). Nouwen worked part-time following an

offer from the Harvard Divinity School to return to academics in 1983. He would follow his passions in Latin America for the rest of the year while teaching one semester annually. Harvard, nevertheless, was still another inappropriate fit. Henri thought Harvard was not where God meant him to be. His spiritual and personal style ran counter to the competitive environment of the Divinity School. The atmosphere lacks intimacy. It serves as a battleground for his intellect. He grew more and more isolated and depressed (p.7).

Henri was invited by Canadian Jean Vanier, who founded a community for people with physical and mental disabilities in 1964, during a time of uncertainty. Vanier sent Henri several invitations to visit the L'Arche community between 1982 and 1985, with each visit lasting longer than the last. Vanier regarded Nouwen as a profoundly spiritual individual endowed with numerous talents, yet he also recognized his need for a place to belong. L'Arche became a true home. In July 1985, Nouwen stepped down from his position at Harvard and began a one-year residency at L'Arche in Trosly, starting in August. He had ultimately discovered his career journey (Nouwen, 2016).

Henri made a significant shift in his life by leaving academia to join the L'Arche group. L'Arche is a worldwide group of communities where individuals with and without intellectual disabilities live together. This change marked a significant turning point in Nouwen's life, as he sought to embody the values of openness and community focus that he had often written about. At L'Arche, Nouwen found a place to face his weaknesses while helping others. His experiences with people who have developmental disabilities significantly changed how he understands love, kindness, and what it means to be human. He built strong friendships, especially with Nathan Ball, who helped him face his insecurities and grow spiritually.

In 1986, Henri accepted a call to serve as pastor of L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada. He quickly became involved in the community's activities. He collaborated with Sue Mosteller, a St. Joseph nun and long-time member of L'Arche, to develop a program that nourished and sustained the spiritual lives of core members and their aides. Nouwen created ecumenical liturgies and accepted the interfaith reality of L'Arche. Nathan Ball, a young Canadian working as an assistant at L'Arche in Trosly-Breuil, would join him in working part-time for the community while pursuing a degree in divinity (Nouwen, 2016).

As a community member, Henri shared a home with aides and individuals with disabilities. He was asked to assist in the care of Adam Arnett, one of the core members with severe disabilities. Through Adam, Nouwen began to understand the gift of disabled individuals in exposing God's love. In a February 16, 1987, letter to Father Paul Wlash, Nouwen wrote, "After many years of studying and teaching theology, it truly has been a blessed

discovery that many of the broken people of L'Arche have revealed more about God's love to me than much of my studying and teaching ever did" (Nouwen, 2016, pp.117-118).

The transition from Harvard to L'Arche had been helpful. The companionship of Nathan, Sue, Adam, and others provided him with a sense of belonging and the feeling that he had found his home, where he created significant spiritual works (Harvard Divinity School, 2011). Yet, within the secure environment of L'Arche, he would face the most profound psychological crisis of his existence. During Christmas in 1987, his friendship with Nathan fell apart. Nathan requested that all communication between them cease. Nathan, who was in a romantic relationship at the time, felt that Nouwen's intensity was becoming too demanding. Henri felt a profound sense of despair. He lost his confidence and motivation to continue in his work. The community referred him to a retreat center in Winnipeg designed for clergy seeking spiritual and psychological support. Henri would remain for seven months of focused therapy. The healing process involved writing daily spiritual imperatives (Nouwen, 2016).

Henri returned to Daybreak part-time in the summer of 1988, intending to integrate his reconciliation with Nathan into the bigger picture. In 1989, Henri returned to Daybreak on a full-time basis. His sense of belonging deepened following a serious injury in a road accident, during which the community came together around him. In the months following the accident, he experienced overwhelming fatigue, yet his spirits remained optimistic, and his mind was filled with fresh ideas for books. "Homecoming" would emerge as a recurring theme in his speeches and writings. Henri had, at last, realized his true home (Nouwen, 2016, p.120).

Nouwen's transition from academia to L'Arche represented not only a shift in external conditions but also signified a profound internal transformation. This transition revealed his limitations and the paradoxical strength inherent in weakness. Nouwen's reflections on kenosis and spiritual poverty were deepened and embodied within the daily rhythms of community life, caring for Adam, and engaging with the vulnerabilities of others. These lived experiences served as the foundation for his theology of vulnerability, prompting both himself and his readers to reconsider the significance of human brokenness in the context of Christ's self-emptying love.

2.2 Henri Nouwen's Reflections on Vulnerability

Henri Nouwen struggled with loneliness and inadequacy almost all his life. He often emphasized the importance of vulnerability, noting that genuine connections and spiritual growth depend on acknowledging one's shortcomings. He urged people to pray for those in

need and accept their challenges. His letters to other correspondents exposed his great compassion for others.

In *Adam: God's Beloved*, Nouwen shares his feelings of loneliness, being left out, and hopelessness. He recognizes that although he lives in a relaxed L'Arche community, Nouwen often feels very needy and dependent, as he writes openly to the reader, "faced with a very insecure, needy, and fragile person: myself" (Nouwen, 1997, p.37). He faced a personal problem that drove him to ask for help from people in his community and a psychiatrist, showing that he was open about his vulnerability. It shows in his writing that Nouwen comes closer to his vulnerability. He said:

> Living close to Adam and the others brought me closer to my own vulnerabilities. While at first it seemed quite obvious who was handicapped and who was not, living together day in and day out made the boundaries less clear. Yes, Adam, Rosie, and Michael couldn't speak, but I spoke too much. Yes, Adam and Michael couldn't walk, but I was running around as if life were one emergency after the other. Yes, John and Roy needed help in their daily tasks, but I, too, was constantly saying, 'Help me, help me. And when I had the courage to look deeper, to face my emotional readiness, my inability to pray, my impatience and restlessness, my many anxieties and fears, the word 'handicap' started to have a whole new meaning. The fact that my handicaps were less visible than those of Adam and his housemates didn't make them less real (Nouwen, 1997, p.37).

Nouwen also recognized the importance of placing the most vulnerable individuals at the center and seeking their unique gifts. He writes:

> At some level, I knew that this was what L'Arche is all about: placing the weakest and most vulnerable persons in the center and looking for their unique gifts. Adam was weaker and more vulnerable than anyone else at Daybreak, and Adam was given to me, the least capable of all, to care for... but not just to care for (Nouwen, 1997, p.22).

Nouwen expresses an immense respect for caring for Adam, the most vulnerable member of the L'Arche community. This quote also captures the profound understanding of vulnerability and community within the L'Arche framework. It emphasizes L'Arche's belief

that the community's most vulnerable members are both our care recipients and our mission. By placing marginalized individuals at the center of the group, Nouwen learns that L'Arche challenges cultural norms that promote strength. Nouwen's experience of being "the least capable of all" highlights the paradox of vulnerability and demonstrates that acknowledging our limits can lead to more meaningful connections.

The explanations above help us understand vulnerability through Nouwen's reflections and experiences. He helps us understand that being vulnerable means being open to our own brokenness, experiencing the paradox of vulnerability, and that this vulnerability can also become a gift for us when we fully embrace it as our source of strength. He experienced that he could recognize his own vulnerabilities, such as impatience, anxieties, inability to pray, and other 'handicap' moments, exactly when he was with those disabled people in L'Arche.

Sometimes, even in our own experiences, we start to understand and feel vulnerable when we can mirror our own brokenness from others. We are not less vulnerable than other people who are in appearance or physically handicapped or paralyzed. Interestingly, Nouwen's experience of vulnerability was not only to recognize it but also to find meaning in this thing as our gift and to give it a more meaningful treasure.

It aligns with the concept of incarnation that we typically understand. God the Son was incarnated and experienced what humans experience. Christ placed himself in this vulnerable body through the Incarnation. The experience of Jesus's incarnation was not only the experience of becoming a human being, but it also shows that Jesus experienced all the limitations of being a human being, including feeling the experience of being a 'handicap,' being fragile, and vulnerable. The God who created time manifested in human history as an unborn child in the womb of an unwed mother. He experienced a vulnerable situation, was born in poverty, and spent his first night resting in a feeding trough. He could not live by himself but needed the care of his parents, Joseph and Mary. He felt the same level of vulnerability and uncertainty as any other infant in the world.

Those statements above prove that Nouwen's experience and reflection also mirror what Jesus experienced. In the incarnation scene, primarily through the nativity, Jesus experienced what we experience, particularly in becoming vulnerable as human beings. However, we also found that Jesus' vulnerability does not indicate weakness but strength and power. By recognizing his own vulnerability, Jesus defeated the forces of evil and brought hope to the world. This notion is also what Nouwen reflected on in the paradox of vulnerability, especially when he realized he was the least capable of all.

The emphasis on the necessity of acknowledging and accepting our vulnerability as a means of spiritual growth and connection with others is connected to what Henri Nouwen reflected on and experienced regarding vulnerability. As part of the Church, Nouwen invites us also to recognize and accept our fragilities, and from these embracing moments, we are invited to reach down to others' vulnerabilities. This embracing and accepting of each other's vulnerabilities truly becomes a moment of spiritual growth for us, bringing us to experience the strength and power of this growth.

2.3 Nouwen's Understanding of Self-Emptying

Henri Nouwen once explicitly cited this biblical reference in his reflection about Kenosis in the book *The Road to Daybreak*, the spiritual journal he kept during the year between leaving Harvard and joining the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Canada. On March 18, 1986, he wrote a reflection titled *The Cry of the Poor*, which reflects his experience of listening to a retreat organized by Jean Vanier about "the descending way of God and the call to find God not just by serving the poor, but by becoming poor" (Nouwen, 1988, pp.137-138).

In this reflection, quoting Philippians 2:7-9, Nouwen believes that the L'Arche community is built on the needs of the poor. In the same way Jesus cared for the suffering, he also saw that L'Arche was founded to help those struggling to connect with others. Jesus came to bring people together, to heal, to create connections, and to make peace. Jesus understood our pain so that we could use it to find our way back to God. Jesus came down to rise (Nouwen, 1988).

Additionally, in his letters to friends, Henri Nouwen may not explicitly label his concept of kenosis. Nevertheless, his themes and insights throughout the letters reflect a great awareness of this spiritual principle. They resonate with the idea of selfless love and encourage people to prioritize the needs of others. Through compassionate gestures and understanding, he inspires people to let go of their egos and serve others, reflecting Christ's love.

Nouwen discusses the concept of being fools for Christ and self-emptying in service to others in his letter to Judd and Evy, a young couple working at a food program, on August 31, 1982. He advises that occasionally, we must be ready to offer to others who might not seem to need or deserve more profound experience of self-emptying. As he writes in the letter, "Maybe that is as close as we can come to an experience of self-emptying. It is the experience of being useless in the presence of the Lord" (Nouwen, 2016, p.64).

From this letter, self-emptying means giving up one's own wants, needs, and ideas to help others. It means letting go of one's pride and personal goals to live a life of love and help others,

just like Christ showed humility and selfless love. This process can create a profound spiritual experience, enabling people to connect more deeply with God and others.

Nouwen points out that feeling "useless" in front of the Lord can help people connect more deeply with an authentic Christian experience. By letting go of their desires, people can find real happiness and meaning in life by connecting with God's wishes and helping others. In short, based on this point, for Nouwen, self-emptying means relinquishing personal power and desires to live a life of love, service, and humility. Like in other letters, this notion leads to a more fulfilling spiritual life and stronger relationships.

Additionally, in Michael Ford's book, we see a similar notion of what Nouwen reflects on, Kenosis. Nouwen suggests that kenosis is not merely a complex idea, but a way of living that involves letting go of oneself, being open, and cultivating a spiritual connection. He encourages people to explore the balance between being secure and being vulnerable, and to embark on a journey towards personal growth and self-understanding. There are three points regarding Kenosis that we can take from Nouwen's understanding of Kenosis:

2.3.1 Kenosis as a Spiritual Practice

Nouwen suggests that spiritual growth involves kenosis, where one must relinquish ego and self-importance. This self-emptying helps people be more open to God's presence and others' needs. It encourages being humble and letting go, which can be both challenging and transformative. Ford quotes Nouwen's writing from the book *The Inner Voice of Love*, a series of meditations where he is initially speaking to himself, implying the value of kenosis in our spiritual practice:

> There is within you a lamb and a lion. Spiritual maturity is the ability to let lamb and lion lie down together. Your lion is your adult, aggressive self. It is your initiative-taking and decision-making self. But there is also your fearful, vulnerable lamb, the part of you that needs affection, support, affirmation, and nurturing. When you heed only your lion, you will and yourself over-extended and exhausted. When you take notice only of your lamb, you will easily become a victim of your need for other people's attention. The art of spiritual living is to fully claim both your lion and your lamb. Then you can act assertively without denying your own needs. And you can ask for affection and care without betraying your talent to offer leadership (Ford, 2002, p.63).

Nouwen's metaphor in the quotes above illustrates kenosis as a profound spiritual journey characterized by self-integration and self-emptying. By harmonizing the assertive "lion" and the vulnerable "lamb" within oneself, individuals move beyond ego-driven behaviors and receive a deeper spiritual understanding. This process of kenosis entails letting go of fixed self-images, harmonizing vulnerability with resilience, and engaging in profound self-reflection. By engaging in this intentional self-emptying, an individual transcends dualistic internal struggles, paving the way for a more solid and genuine spiritual life that fosters a deeper connection with oneself, others, and the divine (Lovett, 2019).[1]

2.3.2. Vulnerability as a Form of Kenosis

Continuing from the quotes above, Nouwen's theology reveals that vulnerability is a profound form of kenosis, a spiritual practice of embracing emptiness that extends beyond simple emotional exposure. Embracing vulnerability involves willingly letting go of protective ego defenses, allowing for genuine connections with others and the divine, which fosters growth. To change, we must find a balance between our assertive and caring sides. Real spiritual maturity doesn't come from putting up emotional walls that can't be broken. Instead, it comes from being brave enough to show others both our whole and flawed selves.

This profound act of trust mirrors the selfless nature of divine love. We can see that the incarnation of God the Son is the most true and real at this point. Jesus becomes vulnerable when he takes himself in human form, which is part of His Self-emptying action. It emphasizes that this vulnerability recalls Christ's kenosis during his incarnation, in which he became a fragile and vulnerable human form. This notion also reminded us that vulnerability allows us to stay grounded in the Gospel and create genuine relationships with others, as Jesus demonstrated through his service to the impoverished and the sick. It is what Nouwen reflected that being vulnerable is a deep form of kenosis and a spiritual practice of emptiness that goes beyond simple emotional exposure.

[1] What Nouwen expressed about kenosis above complements what Pope Francis shared during World Youth Day in Panama in 2019. Francis met with the Bishops of Central America and references St Oscar Romero, the recent Synod on Young People, and the kenosis of Christ. As demonstrated by Christ, who "emptied himself" to be totally receptive to the Father's will, he emphasized that kenosis is the core of the Christian life. According to him, the Church needs to be a "humble and poor Church," where Christ resides among his followers. Furthermore, Pope Francis stated that humility "brings everything back to its right dimension" in his catechesis on the subject. He connected humility to the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3), which describes how one must empty oneself to experience God's whole presence. This is in line with Nouwen's idea of kenosis as a spiritual practice that involves emptying the ego and opening oneself to God.

2.3.2 Living Out Kenosis

We learned that Nouwen describes kenosis as a spiritual practice that involves letting go of oneself, which can change our everyday life. In his book "The Inner Voice of Love," he says, "The more you open yourself to being healed, the more you will discover how deep your wounds are" (Ford, 2002, p.74). As mentioned earlier, he believes being vulnerable is not a sign of weakness but rather a brave way to grow spiritually and heal. Nouwen emphasizes that it is crucial to extend our awareness beyond merely being aware of our thoughts and feelings. He encourages people to incorporate spiritual values into their everyday lives and look deeper for greater meaning beyond what they initially see.

Nouwen also draws insights from his monastic experience at the Genesee, a Trappist monastery in upstate New York. Ford writes, “the less he (Nouwen) was noticed, the less special attention he required; and the less he was different, the more he could live the monastic life” (Ford, 2002, p.144). This critical insight reveals that kenosis is not merely an abstract theological concept, but a daily practice of denying our ego, confronting our own wounds, and making space for a deeper spiritual connection. It is a continuous process of emptying oneself, diminishing one's sense of meaning, and allowing oneself to live a more genuine, spiritually based life. As a result, kenosis requires a deliberate dedication to self-reduction and humility.

2.4 The Ignatian Foundation in Nouwen's Spiritual Journey

It is essential to note that Nouwen never claimed that Ignatian principles directly shaped his pastoral vision. Therefore, it is also essential to clarify this point before discussing the explicit links between them. A closer examination of Nouwen's life and spiritual reflections reveals significant similarities to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola and Ignatian Spirituality. Although there is no substantial evidence that Ignatian spirituality significantly influenced Nouwen's spiritual development, we can still sense these resonances between Nouwen's insights and the Spiritual Exercises.

Nouwen's spiritual journey was shaped by his Dutch Catholic background, academic and psychological training, and, most importantly, his experiences with L'Arche and interactions with Jean Vanier and Thomas Merton. The similarities between Nouwen's kenotic theology and Ignatian practices are best understood as natural bridges or convergence points within the Christian spiritual tradition, rather than as a conscious adoption or direct influence. Although Nouwen did not explicitly identify with Ignatian spirituality, his emphasis on discernment, daily reflection, and accompaniment in times of weakness closely mirrored the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. These similarities demonstrate the richness and breadth of

the Christian tradition, where different spiritual streams can enrich one another without compromising their distinct differences.

2.4.1 The Harvard–L'Arche Decision: Crisis-Based Decision Making

Nouwen's decision to leave Harvard for L'Arche is often regarded as an example of spiritual discernment, a process closely aligned with Ignatian principles. Nouwen's discernment was primarily grounded in his struggles with loneliness, restlessness, and a desire for genuine community, rather than in any formal application of Ignatian principles. Nouwen described his Harvard years as a time when he felt increasingly disconnected from his own spiritual life, despite his intellectual engagement with theology. Although this crisis can be aligned with Ignatian concepts like "desolation" and "consolation," it is more precise to assert that Nouwen's discernment was intuitive and existential rather than systematically Ignatian. His affinity for L'Arche and the tranquility he discovered there stemmed from a profound personal necessity for belonging and vulnerability, rather than from a deliberate engagement with the Spiritual Exercises.

The principle of *agere contra* or acting against disordered attachments (dotMagis Editor, 2017)[2] resonates with Nouwen's significant career transition; however, he did not explicitly reference or assert this principle as his own. Nouwen's conflict with attachment to academic acclaim and social standing was resolved through personal turmoil and pastoral contemplation, rather than through direct interaction with Ignatian literature. His transition to L'Arche was a response to an internal summons for downward mobility and solidarity with the marginalized, a summons that resonates with but is not contingent upon Ignatian spirituality.

2.4.2. The Spirituality of Accompaniment

Nouwen's methodology for pastoral care at L'Arche, which emphasizes accompaniment rather than instruction, bears a significant resemblance to the Ignatian principles of spiritual direction. Like Ignatius's intention for the Exercises to be guided by a companion accompanying the retreatant, Nouwen realized at L'Arche that his function was not to remedy or heal, but to accompany and encourage. This parallel does not imply direct borrowing. Instead, it embodies a more extensive Christian tradition of accompaniment, which Nouwen assimilated from his mentors and his interpretation of the Gospels and the teachings of the

[2] It is important to know that this principle is valuable not only for steering clear of temptation or negative habits but also for fostering our spiritual growth.

Desert Fathers. His relationship with Adam Arnett (Lasch, 2021)[3], in which the "weak" assumed the role of teacher, exemplifies this spirituality profoundly, though it is not exclusively Ignatian. Instead, it exemplifies the Christian paradox that divine strength is perfected in imperfection (2 Cor 12:9), a motif prevalent in various aspects of Catholic spirituality.

2.4.3. The Examen as Daily Practice

Nouwen made it a habit of reflecting on himself every day. This was similar to the Ignatian examen, although he didn't officially associate it with that tradition. In his journals, especially during a time of personal crisis in the late 1980s, he often wrote about how he reflected on his day to identify moments when he felt the presence or absence of God. As part of this routine, we had to think about what events drove us to feel grateful or frustrated. While this approach is similar to the Ignatian emphasis on seeing God in everyday life, Nouwen's method was shaped more by his journey to healing and wholeness than by following a specific spiritual framework.

Therefore, while there are striking similarities between Nouwen's spirituality and Ignatian principles, especially regarding discernment, accompaniment, and daily reflection, it would be inappropriate to say that Nouwen's spiritual journey was strongly influenced by Ignatian spirituality. The connections are more appropriately seen as natural bridges and encounters within the broader Christian tradition, rather than as indications of direct influence or deliberate adoption. This distinction acknowledges the uniqueness of Nouwen's pastoral theology and the depth of Ignatian spirituality as separate but complementary currents in the Church. Nevertheless, we can discern some connections and affinities between the two, especially when examining their perspectives on kenosis and vulnerability.

3. IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY'S AFFINITIES WITH NOUWEN'S VISION ON VULNERABILITY AND KENOSIS

3.1 The Spiritual Exercises as Pedagogy of Vulnerability

The relationship between the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola and the pastoral theology of Henri Nouwen sheds light on the concepts of kenosis and vulnerability. This connection is characterized by a shared perspective that views vulnerability as an ascetic discipline rather than as involuntary suffering. The Spiritual Exercises emphasize that the first

[3] As mentioned before, Adam received a diagnosis of developmental disabilities and epilepsy at L'Arche, which runs homes and residential programs for individuals with developmental disabilities.

week centers on the experience of sin and the vulnerability of the human condition. This first week's emphasis aligns with Henri Nouwen's assertion that we encounter God in our poverty. Both frameworks encourage us to reconceptualize vulnerability as a deliberate choice. Ignatius, through his contemplation of hell and sin (Loyola, n.d.), and Nouwen, by choosing to depart from academia to join L'Arche, present a comparable framework in which vulnerability serves as a pathway to encounter God and His grace.

This readiness to accept one's shortcomings aligns with the texts of the Spiritual Exercises, which stress being aware of God's presence even when people are vulnerable. During the First Week, thinking about sin is not meant to make people feel hopeless. Instead, it is meant to make people more open to the idea that their wounds and struggles can become places where God's mercy is found, as Nouwen often says in his writings about vulnerability.

The advancement through the Four Weeks of Exercises reflects Nouwen's personal transition from academic achievement to the vulnerability of L'Arche. The confrontation with sin during the First Week mirrors Nouwen's increasing realization at Harvard that his external achievements concealed an internal void. The contemplation of Christ's concealed existence during the Second Week aligns with Nouwen's realization that significance arises not from accomplishments but from mere presence, such as bathing Adam's body, partaking in meals, and being present to suffering without attempting to remedy it.

The *Suscipe* prayer's (Welborn, 2024)[4] profound surrender mirrors Henri Nouwen's understanding of spiritual life as a life in which we continually turn toward the truth. Nouwen exemplifies it by washing Adam Arnett's body, a sacramental act of reciprocal self-emptying. Woo-jung Kim, in his thesis, claims that these kinds of practices foster the virtue of humility, which serves as the foundation for receiving grace in vulnerability (Kim, 2023). A significant overlap arises in their approach to desire. Ignatius' Principle and Foundation advocates for detachment from "health over sickness, riches over poverty" (Loyola, n.d., p.23), Nouwen's journals also express how hard it was for him to let go of the need for academic recognition. They talk about how he used to want Harvard to approve of him and how his time at L'Arche was like an inner purification. Both proponents endorse *agere contra* as the route to liberation.

[4] Take Lord, Receive, or the Suscipe, is a powerful prayer of giving up everything and being open to God's love. The "Contemplation to Attain God's Way of Loving" in St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises is where the "Suscipe" prayer comes from.

3.2 Nouwen's Contribution to Ignatian Pedagogical Method

Henri Nouwen's theology of vulnerability and kenosis makes a significant contribution to Ignatian pedagogy, particularly when applied in real-life situations, including daily reflection, retreats, and the pedagogy of accompaniment. Daily reflection, based on the Examen and used in Ignatian education, encourages both students and teachers to be honest about their times of vulnerability and growth. Nouwen's willingness to accept his shortcomings inspired the practice of reflection. It creates a space where vulnerability is not hidden but openly acknowledged, allowing individuals to grow spiritually and learn. By incorporating kenosis into classroom or retreat rituals, for example, people are encouraged to reflect on how self-emptying can transform them, not as a passive act of surrender, but as a conscious expression of kindness and openness to others.

The Ignatian principles of *cura personalis* and *magis* are at the heart of this way of teaching. *Cura personalis*, which means care for the whole person (Otto, 2021), means taking complete interest in each person's mental, emotional, and spiritual growth. Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., ever said that "in essence, 'cura personalis' is simply help, from person to person, so that God and man may really meet" (Kolvenbach, 2007).[5] This idea aligns well with Nouwen's pastoral style, which emphasizes careful presence and acknowledges that everyone has a unique journey to meet God and discover their self. As mentioned by Eric A. Clayton in one of his articles, in *cura personalis*, we tend to our well-being in various ways that our lives require (Clayton, 2023). In everyday circumstances, *cura personalis* is evident when teachers listen, support, and care for their students beyond the school environment, helping them recognize their weaknesses as part of their growth. Ignatian schools and formation programs can apply this approach to create communities where both students and teachers feel valued and can discuss their problems. This approach can foster genuine relationships and strengthen them.

The concept of *magis*, meaning "more" (Martin, 2018), amplifies the transformative power of vulnerability in Ignatian education. Fleming implicitly suggested that *Magis* is not about always striving for perfection, but about discerning what is more loving, just, and in line with God's will, which is to share our lives forever with Him (Fleming, 1996). This *Magis* spirit encourages teachers and students to recognize that, when it comes to vulnerability, they need to do more than simply accept that they are vulnerable. They need to be radical, generous, and

[5] This is a quote from an opening speech by Fr. General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach at the beginning of the course-workshop on 'Spiritual Accompaniment in the Ignatian Tradition' (Rome, January-February 2007) organized by the Society's Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality.

serve, accompany, and give of themselves even when it feels risky or uncomfortable. Consequently, integrating Nouwen's kenotic spirituality with Ignatian pedagogy leads to a dynamic approach to sharing knowledge, where vulnerability serves as a basis for deeper service, unique growth, and comprehensive human flourishing.

There are several concrete ways that Nouwen's concept of kenosis integrates into Ignatian educational practice. In Jesuit schools and universities, for example, teachers and formators may illustrate kenosis by practicing *cura personalis*, particularly by ensuring that students feel secure enough to discuss their weaknesses without fear of judgment. As a core Ignatian practice, the daily examen encourages both students and teachers to be honest about their shortcomings and mistakes, not as things to feel bad about, but as opportunities to grow and depend more on God's grace. Spiritual companions can learn from Nouwen's example by listening with understanding and humility, recognizing that genuine help comes from vulnerability shared together rather than possessing extensive knowledge. People can share their stories and struggles during retreats and sessions for communal discernment. This can help create a culture where weaknesses are not hidden but openly acknowledged, allowing individuals to connect with others and discover God's will. Through these means, Nouwen's kenosis contributes to Ignatian pedagogy, making it more relevant in the contemporary context of human fragility.

3.3 Critical Exploration on the Spirituality of Vulnerability

The spirituality of vulnerability and kenosis also has transformative potential. However, it requires careful discernment, especially when examined through the lens of pastoral theology. Miriam Leidinger, a scholar in international development and theology, warns against the oversimplification of vulnerability in Christian practice, highlighting its “inherent tensions and ambiguities” (Leidinger, 2020) when separated from structural and relational realities. She advises that viewing vulnerability as a “trump card” can be problematic if it is romanticized as an unquestioned virtue, as it may obscure systemic injustices or reinforce harmful power dynamics. When vulnerability is viewed only as personal suffering to be accepted, it can unintentionally mute criticisms of oppression or hinder accountability within communities.

Leidinger’s critique resonates with Henri Nouwen’s cautious perspective, presenting vulnerability as a conscious and collective effort instead of mere passive acceptance. A constructed spirituality of vulnerability, as Leidinger (2020) suggests, moves beyond simplistic binaries like “victim versus perpetrator” and instead acknowledges complexity, necessitating continuous theological and ethical discernment. This involves differentiating between

vulnerability as a voluntary expression of love, exemplified by Nouwen's kenotic pastoral accompaniment, and vulnerability that is forced upon individuals by unjust systems such as poverty or marginalization.

To prevent reductionism, Leidinger encourages "the doing of a vulnerable theology" Leidinger (2020). It is a practice rooted in Christ's kenosis that emphasizes critical self-awareness, relational accountability, and structural justice. This method emphasizes the importance of recognizing how power, privilege, and cultural context influence experiences of vulnerability. It advocates for the creation of communities that respond to vulnerability with mutual support rather than exploitation, while also addressing the systemic roots of vulnerability and providing pastoral care for individuals. Through the integration of Leidinger's framework, Christian educators and ministers can foster environments where vulnerability can catalyze liberation, rather than remaining an unchanging ideal. This method ensures that kenotic spirituality is grounded in love, justice, and the well-being of the community, enabling individuals to face life's challenges with courage and understanding.

3.4 The Examen as Kenotic Practice: From Anxiety to Gratitude

Henri Nouwen's reflection, as articulated in *The Inner Voice of Love*, presents a compelling framework for how daily spiritual reflection can facilitate a transformative engagement with one's vulnerability. Nouwen regarded the examen not as a surface ritual, but as an opportunity to address his vulnerabilities, anxieties, and interpersonal conflicts candidly. Every evening, he would reflect on his day, focusing specifically on instances of vulnerability—an abrupt reaction to a caregiver, a conversation evaded due to fear, or a moment of emotional fatigue. Nouwen, through this daily practice, discerned the nuanced manifestations of grace amidst the fissures of quotidian existence, transforming his vulnerabilities into avenues for divine presence and direction.

This method of examination strongly aligns with the fundamental principles of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. Kim articulates this dynamic concisely, that vulnerability becomes the raw material for virtue formation. He claims, "The Exercises encourage them to recognize their own vulnerability as made in the image of God by contemplating Jesus' life and imitating him" (Kim, 2023, p.86). In Ignatian spirituality, the examen serves not merely as a mechanism for moral assessment but as a method for discerning God's presence amid both consolation and desolation. Nouwen's readiness to expose his anxieties and failures through prayer reflects Ignatius' advice to "relish what is bitter" (p.121), converting self-reproach into sacramental consciousness. Nouwen's examen practice is

profoundly kenotic. It represents an act of self-emptying that creates room for God's healing and wisdom to manifest precisely in areas where he perceives his inadequacy.

In later years, Nouwen had an instance that demonstrates how his practice of self-examination helped him recognize and acknowledge his weaknesses, such as times of shame or anxiety, and view them as opportunities to experience Christ's presence and guidance. This instance of sincere self-reflection illustrates how the examen can transform feelings of shame and regret into avenues for grace. Nouwen transformed his self-blame into an opportunity for communion with Christ, who encounters him in his vulnerability. This reflects the Ignatian call to discover God in all things, including the most distressing and humiliating experiences.

The communal aspect of the examen at L'Arche further aligns Nouwen's perspective with Ignatian spirituality. At L'Arche, collective contemplation on daily vulnerabilities, based on the Exercises' particular examen (Loyola, n.d.), evolved into a ritual of reciprocal kenosis. Caregivers and core members would convene to recognize their interdependence and constraints, thereby fostering an environment that promotes virtuous interdependence. In this context, vulnerability was not an individual burden but a collective asset, promoting solidarity and strengthening the bonds of trust within the community. Nouwen's experience at L'Arche illustrates how the examen, when collectively practiced, can transform a group into a community characterized by compassion and genuine support, wherein each member's wounds serve as sources of collective wisdom and grace.

4. CONCLUSION

Henri Nouwen’s theology of vulnerability, especially when read through the lens of Ignatian spirituality, calls the Church and its ministers to a radical reimagining of vulnerability, not as a deficit to be overcome, but as a privileged site for divine encounter. By intertwining his journey of brokenness with the communal life of L’Arche and the ascetical rigor of the Spiritual Exercises, Nouwen demonstrates that human limitation is not an obstacle to holiness but the very ground upon which God’s grace is revealed. In this light, kenosis, or self-emptying, is not merely a Christological doctrine but a daily spiritual practice, inviting believers to participate in the mystery of Christ’s vulnerability and surrender.

The practical implications of this synthesis are profound for contemporary pastoral ministry. Nouwen’s integration of the Ignatian examen with his commitment to mutual vulnerability offers a powerful antidote to the perfectionism and self-sufficiency that often pervade church leadership. As Brené Brown observes, “the armor of perfectionism” prevents authentic connection and healing, both for ministers and those they serve (Brown, 2012). By

leading from a place of woundedness rather than invulnerability, ministers can foster communities marked by compassion, humility, and genuine accompaniment. Genuine companionship within individuals entails a heart freed of pretense and defense, a truth that Henri Nouwen demonstrated through his honest care for Adam and his transparency regarding his struggles.

Yet, the path of kenosis is not without its tensions and dangers. The Ignatian principle of *agere contra* can, if misunderstood, lead to a neglect of self-care and even emotional exhaustion, especially in contexts of chronic pastoral stress or clergy burnout. Nouwen's own life testifies to this risk. His deep identification with the suffering of others sometimes brought him to the brink of psychological collapse, requiring periods of retreat and therapy. Thus, future research and pastoral practice must seek a creative balance between self-emptying love and the Ignatian value of *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person, ensuring that vulnerability leads to integration and growth rather than depletion.

Ultimately, Nouwen's legacy is that of an unfinished symphony. It is a spiritual journey that continually invites us to deeper surrender, greater honesty, and more radical trust in God's presence amid weakness. Nouwen asserts, in a poetic way, that Adam's life revealed to him a kind of Christ-centered grammar, one marked by the language of self-emptying, embodiment, and grace. This sums up the main point of this article: When vulnerability is accepted as a kenotic discipline, it changes both the way people change and how the Church acts together. In a world marked by anxiety, fragmentation, and the idolization of strength, Nouwen and St. Ignatius together beckon us to discover the hidden power of the cross: that in our wounds, we meet the Wounded Healer, and in our emptiness, we become vessels of resurrection hope.

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