Wounded Lover:
The Emotional Life and Spiritual Writings of Henri J. M. Nouwen

Implications for Gay Christians in the Church

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy
by Michael Andrew Ford

February 2002

Dedication

To the memory of my father, Kenneth Ford (1930-1979),
a loving parent and a gifted lecturer

Michael Andrew Ford

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical examination of the emotional life of the Dutch Roman Catholic priest, Henri J. M. Nouwen - one of the most influential spiritual writers and pastoral theologians of the late 20th century. The thesis argues that, throughout his life, Nouwen was tormented by his gay identity; that knowledge and understanding of this struggle are of fundamental importance in appreciating his writings on woundedness and healing which I identify as key elements within his spiritual landscape. Employing an analytically biographical approach, the work draws substantially from original interviews with Nouwen's friends and associates as well as his own books, articles, tapes and films. Tracing Nouwen's psychological, spiritual and sexual development, and analysing his emotional character, the thesis contends that Nouwen's central concerns of loneliness, anguish and love, which characterised his theology, emerged essentially from his own fears and longings as a gay Catholic priest vowed to celibacy. I also show that, by building on Nouwen's spirituality, gay men and lesbians can reclaim their legitimate vocation in the Christian community. In this way, I conclude, they transform the 'wound' of homosexuality into a gift for the Church of the 21st century.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to record my sincere thanks and appreciation to my supervisor, Dr David Torevell, for his helpful advice and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis; to Professor Ian Markham and Dr Michael McGhee for their support and guidance; and to Stephen Edwards, Stephen Hardwicke, Eva Heymann, Peter Huxham, Bill Kirkpatrick, Giles Legood, Tim Pike, Robert Plant and John Squire for many stimulating discussions in the process.

I am particularly grateful to Henri J. M. Nouwen's family, friends and associates for their co-operation; and to staff at the Henri Nouwen Literary Centre and the Nouwen Archives for their efficiency.

Insights from my published biography of Nouwen, *Wounded Prophet,* are used in the thesis. This initial work, completed during the first two years of academic research, provided the impetus for a doctoral thesis and has been substantially developed by supplementary material and study.

INTRODUCTION

This is an investigation into the emotional life of a world-renowned spiritual guide. Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996) was a Roman Catholic priest, clinical psychologist and pastoral theologian who became one of the world's most successful writers of popular Christian spirituality. The Dutch-American author of more than 40 books translated into many languages, he built a reputation to rival that of C. S. Lewis and Thomas Merton.[1] As a preacher, he once had even greater impact than Billy Graham.[2] While some question Nouwen's exalted position in the spiritual landscape of the late 20th century, few dispute the extraordinary influence of his writings which has not diminished since his death. He is slightly more popular among Protestants than Catholics.[3]

It is, perhaps, all the more surprising, then, that such a charismatic figure should have lived his 64 years without becoming the subject of a major critical study. Chapters about him appear in occasional volumes on spirituality but, at the time of his death, no book solely focusing on him had been published. The situation was remedied a few weeks after Nouwen's burial with the Dutch publication of Jurjen Beumer's *Onrustig zoeken naar God: De spiritualiteit van Henri Nouwen*.[4] For people who had read Nouwen for many years, Beumer's book was helpful in weaving into a coherent

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[1] This comparison is made by most of Nouwen's American publishers in their book publicity.

[2] In a survey conducted in 1994 among 3,400 US Protestant church leaders, Nouwen was named as their second greatest influence. Lyle Schaller, a church growth specialist, was ranked top; the evangelist, Billy Graham, third. Nouwen preached for three consecutive Sundays on *The Hour of Power*, a televised Protestant service from The Crystal Cathedral, California, led by the evangelist, Robert Schuller who, in his preaching school, now uses the videotapes as a model of Gospel communication.

[3] Robert Heller who was Nouwen's editor at the Crossroad Publishing Company, New York expresses this view. Heller says Nouwen never fought shy of 'speaking passionately about Jesus.' Robert Schuller meanwhile, believes Nouwen appealed to evangelicals because he 'honoured the historic essence of the Christian faith and was never into revisionism.' (Schuller, 1998). In articles and interviews, Nouwen seems to feel that evangelicals, while fervent and committed, lack the mystical dimension of spiritual living.

[4] This book, published by Uitgeverij Lannoo, Tielt, Belgium, 1996, appeared in English under the title, *A Restless Seeking for God* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), translated by David E. Schlaver and Nancy Forest-Flier.

pattern the varied strands of Nouwen's theological thinking. But the book did not address the person of Nouwen or his life in any depth, thereby failing to throw much new light on Nouwen himself, especially the more ambivalent dimensions of his recollected experience.

Interview Methodology

Drawing on both my theological and journalistic training, I spent a year travelling across Northern Europe and North America to meet more than 100 of Nouwen's friends, colleagues, rivals and family members.[5] My primary methodology was through journalistic-style interviews. Between June 1997 and May 2001, I interviewed 125 people, most of whom had known Nouwen for many years. On most occasions, interviews were recorded in person but a number were also carried out by telephone or e-mail. Eighty per cent of those interviewed were male. Most were aged over 50. A fifth were Roman Catholic priests, Anglican priests and Protestant ministers. The majority of the 20 per cent female interviewees comprised religious sisters or women who had spent some time living in community. The majority of interviewees were practising Roman Catholics. Others represented Orthodox, Episcopal and Baptist traditions. A small sample was Jewish. Twenty of the men interviewed disclosed to me that they were homosexual.

All represented key areas of Nouwen's life and ministry: members of his family, including his father and brothers; former students from seminary days and the years Nouwen had spent training as a clinical psychologist; colleagues and friends from academic life, publishing, monasteries, the missionary movement, the L'Arche community, justice and peace movements, AIDS work, the gay community and a flying trapeze troupe.

I travelled to the places where Nouwen had lived, worked and visited – or to places where his associates now live. They included Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Nijmegen and Geysteren in Holland; Berlin and Frankfurt in Germany; the L'Arche community at Trosly Breuil in northern France; London, Oxford, Chobham and

[5] The interviews were recorded on cassette, sometimes over several days. A number were conducted by telephone. People began speaking publicly about Nouwen for the first time.

Exeter, England. In the United States, I met interviewees in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Harvard); New Haven, Connecticut (Yale); The Abbey of the Genesee in upstate New York; New York City; Washington DC; Nashville, Tennessee; South Bend, Indiana (Notre Dame); Ghost Ranch Conference Centre, New Mexico; San Francisco and Oakland, California. In Ontario, Canada, I researched in Kitchner, Toronto and Richmond Hill.

Although I had questions in mind for each interviewee, I did not have a specific list and therefore did not disclose my questions before the interviews. Many told me afterwards that they found the interviewing process a form of therapy. It enabled them to articulate their thoughts and feelings as they were coming to terms with their loss in the early years after Nouwen's death. Some commented that the experience became part of their own bereavement process. As my thesis is the first to examine Nouwen's personal life, my questions attempted to reveal hitherto unknown details about Nouwen's early family life and spiritual upbringing; his psycho-spiritual growth during adolescence and beyond; and his dual career as a teacher and a writer. But as well as accruing information about Nouwen's outer world, I set out to discover dimensions of his own spiritual life. I crafted the thesis from a predominantly psycho-spiritual perspective. This technique, an exercise in what I wish to term 'a spirituality of journalism', enabled me to address and examine a number of ambiguous and repetitive statements in Nouwen's writings on the themes of fear, loneliness and the search for love, while at the same time allowing me to put to the test rumours about the precise nature and intensity of his emotional struggles. In many respects the methodology was devised in such a way as to glean, truthfully but sensitively, 'the inner story' of a best-selling spiritual writer.

After returning to England and listening back to my material, it was necessary to broaden the scope of the thesis by examining the difficulties gay priests face in the Roman Catholic Church. I also decided to explore ways in which homosexual Christians might learn from Nouwen's own experience and spirituality. To help me gain a wider perspective, I collected the insights of a number of gay priests, some of whose stories were recorded anonymously and in confidence. These interviews, combined with extensive reading of Nouwen's spiritual writings, along with the study of psychological and theological texts (some written from a gay perspective),

enabled me to construct and clarify my argument. [The full transcripts of two interviews are included as appendices].

It seemed to me that such an open-ended style of methodology and the direct involvement of people from so many different worlds would give me a certain academic equilibrium, from which I would be able to extricate fact from fantasy and make more informed and balanced judgements about the subject of my study – and the implications of his struggles for gay Christians. Nouwen's wide circle of influence and his own deep complexities dictated a procedure which would do justice both to his international renown and his own psycho-spiritual profundity. My methodology, merging journalistic praxis with theological investigation, seemed pertinent and apposite.

Quotations are used throughout the general text. Where I consider they give particular weight to my argument they are indented. Where an original interview has been used, the name of the person and the year the interview took place appear in brackets after the quotations (for example, Naus 1997). All other bracketed references allude to authors and the page references of their books in the bibliography (for instance, Shinnick, 1997: 7-8) A small number of writers, such as John McNeill, have been quoted both from their own books and from their personal interviews for this thesis.

The interviews informed my portrait of Nouwen, *Wounded Prophet*, published in 1999.[6] The book revealed, for the first time, that while Nouwen had been an extraordinarily gifted and compassionate priest, he had been plagued throughout his life by feelings of insecurity, loneliness and depression - 'the most tortured human being I have ever met'.[7] It also claimed his creativity had been fuelled, in particular, by the pain of his secretly-lived, homosexual struggles, an argument developed in this present analysis of Nouwen which is based largely on interviews undertaken

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[6] *Wounded Prophet* was published in January 1999 by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London, and in May 1999 by Doubleday, New York. The book has been translated into Dutch, Spanish, Brazilian-Portuguese and Korean.

[7] This was how Nouwen was once described to his friend, Michael Harank (Harank, 1997).

specifically for the research. An interview Nouwen recorded with me for BBC Radio 4 is also explored. This, then, is predominantly a psychoanalytic study of a man described at his funeral as having been a 'a wounded lover'. While psychoanalysis, according to the gay Catholic writer, Andrew Sullivan, is a good place to begin to examine the 'normality' of homosexuality, in many ways, in the realm of humanities, 'it is the most interesting place to start' (Sullivan, 1998: 94).

Nouwen: A Life

Henri Jozef Machiel Nouwen was born in Nijkerk, on the edge of the Veluwe Hills in central Holland on January 24, 1932, feast day of St Francis de Sales, patron saint of writers. His family were devout Catholics. His uncle, Dr Anton Ramselaar, was a priest of the Archdiocese of Utrecht and an adviser to the Vatican on Jewish-Christian relations. An aunt was a nun. Nouwen's father, Laurent Jean-Marie Nouwen, became professor of tax law at the University of Nijmegen. His mother, Maria Huberta Helena Ramselaar, took a particular interest in Christian mysticism. The eldest of four children, Nouwen was educated by the Crozier Fathers in the village of Bussum and by the Jesuits at Aloysius College in The Hague.

After seven years' training for the priesthood at the seminaries of Apeldoorn and Rijsenburg, Henri Nouwen was ordained on July 21, 1957, in St Catherine's Cathedral, Utrecht, by Archbishop Bernard Alfrink. Between 1957 and 1964, he was a doctoral student in psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964, Nouwen left Holland to further his psychological education as a fellow in the programme for religion and psychiatry at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas. In 1966 he took up his first teaching appointment as visiting professor in the psychology department of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. In 1968 he returned to Holland for three years as a staff member of the Pastoral Institute, Amsterdam, and faculty member of the Catholic Theological Institute, Utrecht. He also undertook further theological studies at the University of Nijmegen.

A ten-year commitment to Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, in the United States, began in 1971 when he was appointed associate professor of pastoral theology. He received tenure in 1974 and became professor of pastoral theology in

1977. During this period he undertook a number of long sabbaticals which were to resource the spirituality for a number of his books. These included two monastic stays at the Abbey of the Genesee, Piffard, in upstate New York (1974 and 1979), a period as a fellow at the Ecumenical Institute, Collegeville, Minnesota, and six months as scholar-in-residence at the North American College in Rome. Titles such as *The Wounded Healer*, *Reaching Out*, *The Genesee Diary* and *Clowning in Rome* emerged from this period. After Yale Nouwen distanced himself from academia for a year, becoming a family brother at the Abbey of the Genesee and a missionary priest with the Maryknoll Community in Bolivia and Peru where he encountered liberation theology and the vision of Gustavo Gutierrez. In 1983 he returned to academic life as a professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, but continued to visit Latin America, the subject of an influential series of high-profile lecture tours by Nouwen in the United States during the mid-1980s.

In 1984, Nouwen resigned from Harvard. In what was to prove his most counter-cultural decision, he spent a year with the L'Arche community in France, living among people with developmental disabilities. The following year he accepted a position as pastor of the L'Arche, Daybreak, Toronto, where he spent the last decade of his life. In 1986, Nouwen suffered an emotional breakdown and underwent six months' therapy. This proved to be a major turning point in terms of his own self-awareness and his understanding of unconditional love and dependency:

> I vividly remember how I had, at one time, become totally dependent on the affection and friendship of one person. This dependency threw me into a pit of great anguish and brought me to the verge of a very self-destructive depression. But from the moment I was helped to experience my interpersonal addiction as an expression of a need for total surrender to a loving God who would fulfill the deepest desires of my heart, I started to live my dependency in a radically new way. Instead of living it in shame and embarrassment, I was able to live it as an urgent invitation to claim God's unconditional love for myself, a love I can depend on without any fear (Nouwen, 1993b: 80-81).

During and after his recovery, Nouwen continued to write many books, including *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, *Life of the Beloved*, *The Inner Voice of Love* and *Adam*. He also shared a preaching ministry with the disabled and became involved in wide-ranging projects for peace and social justice. During his final years, Nouwen

developed a number of original theological insights, including a distinct spirituality of the flying trapeze. He died of a heart attack in Hilversum, Holland, on 21 September, 1996, aged 64. At the time of his death, Nouwen was the most widely read writer in the English-speaking world in the area of Christian spirituality (Beumer, 1997: 129).

The Spiritual Influence of Nouwen

The spirituality of Nouwen emanates from an emphasis on the heart which is far greater than the seat of the affections. It is the biblical notion of the heart as the centre of the whole person; the centre of consciousness and freedom, affectivity and imagination, of all relational life. The heart is the innermost self and 'that intimate core of our experience' (Callahan, 1990: 201). Nouwen's spirituality, then, is fundamentally relational. He names certain attitudes of the heart which are counter-cultural to North American individualism. Compassion is the fellowship of the weak and a corrective to humankind's ambition for power. Gratitude is an openness to receive and a counterbalance to people's tendency to identify themselves with what they produce. Community is the fruit of solitude and a corrective to individualism. In these ways, Nouwen articulates an apostolic spirituality of the heart based on 'the integration of compassionate ministry and contemplative prayer, an ecumenical spirituality for all contemporary Christians since we are all called to serve God's people, and a eucharistic spirituality that celebrates gratefully the saving deeds of God in Christ' (Callahan, 1990: 202).

The human heart is Nouwen's major theological construct, a sacred space within all people 'where God dwells and where we are invited to dwell with God' (Nouwen, 1994e: 8). This definition owes much to his study of Orthodox spirituality.[8] The heart is the sacred space of mutual indwelling between God and humanity, the source

[8] Nouwen was influenced by the Hesychastic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, especially the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. He was attracted to the thinking of Evagrius Ponticus who viewed the contemplative life as one which began to see the world as transparent, pointing beyond itself to its true nature. Russian Orthodox spirituality and the spiritual treatise, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, about the descent of the mind to the heart in prayer, were also influential. An orthodox priest friend in New York, Father John Garvey, suggests that part of Nouwen's attraction to Orthodoxy was the idea of an alternative approach to Christianity in which one could have both a deep sense of freedom and a deep sense of fidelity to tradition. Icons became for Nouwen 'the focus of an interior stillness.' (Garvey, 1997).

of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional and moral energies, 'the central and unifying organ of our personal life' (Nouwen, 1990b: 77). As the mind is allowed and encouraged to descend into the heart, through contemplative prayer and meditation, a person's core identity is progressively able to conform to the image of Christ. Christensen says that, for Nouwen, the heart is the place where humanity and divinity touch, the conjunction of heaven and earth, where the finite heart of humanity is mystically unified with the infinite heart of God.[9]

Nouwen's methodology is 'theology from above'. He understands his vocation as 'prophetic' – to look at people and the world through the eyes of God and to speak and write from that place of divine-human encounter: 'I have to kneel before the Father, put my ear against his chest and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of God. Then, and only then, can I say carefully and very gently what I hear.' Nouwen calls this method 'speaking from eternity into time' (Nouwen, 1994b: 17). He feels called to enter into 'the sanctuary of my own being where God has chosen to dwell'. There, prayerfully in the presence of God, he can ask his questions from below, live the questions, and receive answers from above (Nouwen, 1994b: 17-18).

Christensen points out that Nouwen understood 'theology' mystically as both a noun and a verb. Nominatively, theology is the personal and prayerful study of God 'where is God and who God is for me' (Nouwen, 1990c: 10). As a verb, theology is 'looking at the world from God's perspective' (Nouwen, 1990c: 63). Christensen notes two of Nouwen's favourite metaphors are 'above and below,' not, he stresses, as referents to geographical locations, but as symbols of divine and human sources of wisdom and understanding. Nouwen felt psychology and sociology, and much theology, asked questions only 'from below'. These shed light in only one realm of reality. Theo-logia, rightly understood as the personal and prayerful study of God, could, he believed, access 'answers from above' – from a spiritual perspective of the 'higher, deeper, eternal realm' (Christensen, *Questions from below*).

[9] Michael Christensen, *Questions from Below and Answers from Above: the Mystical Methodology of Henri Nouwen,* Tipple-Vosburgh lecture, Drew University, October 1997 (unpublished).

Nouwen tended not to write or talk about spirituality as such, preferring to speak of 'the spiritual life.' In order to consider Nouwen's influence as a spiritual guide, I shall first consider various meanings of the term *spirituality*, notably its Christian understanding, and then try to locate Nouwen (who tended to avoid categorisation) in the spiritual context of his time. I shall also examine how Nouwen himself understood the word *spiritual* which he uses frequently in all his books. The word spiritual derives from the Latin *spiritualitas*, which is related to the words *spiritus* and *spiritualis*. These were used to translate St Paul's *pneuma* and *pneumatikos*. In Pauline theology, 'spirit' (*pneuma*) is set in opposition to 'flesh' (Greek *sarx*; Latin *caro*). The word 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*) is contrasted with 'fleshly' (Greek *sarkikos*; Latin *carnalis*) or 'animal' (Greek *psychikos*; Latin *animalis*). As Walter Principe notes, significantly for later developments, they are contrasted neither with 'body' (Greek *soma*; Latin *corpus*), 'bodily' (Greek *somatikos*; Latin *corporalis*) nor with 'matter' (Greek *hyle*; Latin *materia*). Paul would have understood a 'spiritual' person as being someone whose whole being and life were ordered, led or influenced by the 'Spirit of God'. (Greek *Pneuma Theou*; Latin *Spiritus Dei*). A 'fleshy', 'psychic' or 'animal' person would have been one whose whole being and life were opposed to God's Spirit. The Pauline opposition is not between the incorporeal and the corporeal, or between the immaterial and the material, but between two ways of life (Principe in Downey, 1993: 931).

Principe believes it is possible to distinguish a number of different but related levels of spirituality. The most basic, and most relevant for this study, is that of a person's lived experience, what he terms 'the real or existential level'. For Christian spirituality, the resurgence of Biblical theology and a deeper awareness of pneumatology in the West have resulted in this 'lived spirituality' being connected with the Pauline notion: Christian life is guided by the Holy Spirit, who is given by the Father and the risen Christ to make people sisters and brothers of Christ and children of the Father as well as to fashion women and men into images of Christ (Rom 8: 29, 16-17). The Holy Spirit bestows on individuals and the community the gifts of faith which produce fruits and charisms to build up the Christian community (1 Cor 12:4-11, 28-30; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4: 11-13). These gifts of the Spirit and the person's mystical union with Christ create an ecclesial context in which Christian life

in the spirit can be celebrated through word and sacrament (Principe in Downey, 1993: 932).

Drawing on traditional metaphors for 'breath' in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, Richard Woods sees 'spirit' alluding to the essential human capacity to receive and transmit the life of God, 'our unlimited openness to being, life and conscious relationship' (Woods, 1996: 10). Spirituality is fundamentally concrete and real because it encompasses all the beliefs and attitudes related to the human spirit in its collective and individual forms. It also has a social dimension: people acquire a characteristic spirituality in an ongoing dialogue within their own nurturing and supportive communities. For Daniel Helminiak, spirituality is a concern for transcendence and a lived reality. It concerns all those aspects of human living 'that help enhance and unfold the human spiritual capacity', particular ways of advancing spiritual growth as advocated by different traditions or schools and the beliefs and practices that a particular person follows 'to nourish his or her spiritual sensitivities and growth' (Helminiak, 1996: 32).

Philip Sheldrake locates Christian spirituality in 'the whole of human life at depth' (Sheldrake, 1991: 52). It concerns not only the techniques of prayer but a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit in the context of a community of faith. He sees contemporary Christian spirituality as being explicitly Trinitarian, Christological and ecclesial. Spirituality derives its identity from the Christian belief that human beings are capable of entering into a relationship with God who is both transcendent and indwelling in the heart of all created things. The relationship is lived out in a community of people committed to Christ and sustained by the Spirit of God.

For Michael Downey, the two essential components – 'spirituality constants' - in any approach to spirituality are an awareness of levels of reality not immediately apparent and a quest for personal integration in the face of forces of fragmentation and depersonalisation. Spirituality is the authentic human quest for ultimate value (Downey, 1997: 14). It relates to a fundamental dimension of human being; the full range of human experience as it is brought to bear on the quest for integration through self-transcendence; the expression of insights about that experience; and a

disciplined study. In view of the fact that redemption through Jesus Christ and divinisation through the Holy Spirit comprise the Christian life, Christian spirituality must be understood as being grounded in the mystery of the Trinity. Downey argues that the doctrine of the Trinity functions as the summary of the Christian faith. It expresses 'the central Christian conviction that the God who saves through Christ by the power of the Spirit lives eternally in a communion of persons, divine and human, in love' (Downey, 1997: 44).

While Sandra Schneiders views spirituality itself in more relational terms than Downey – 'the actualization of the human capacity for self-transcendence, in and through the establishment of personal relationships'- she defines *Christian* spirituality in similar language to his. It is 'that particular actualization of the capacity for self-transcendence that is constituted by the substantial gift of the Holy Spirit establishing a life-giving relationship with God in Christ' (Schneiders, quoted in LaNoue, 2000: 2). Deirdre LaNoue seems more comfortable with Elizabeth Dreyer's definition which harmonises with Nouwen's approach of reaching out to oneself, others and God: 'Christian spirituality is the daily, communal, lived expression of one's ultimate beliefs characterized by openness to the self-transcending love of God, self, neighbour, and world through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit' (LaNoue, 2000: 2).

With such a plethora of definitions and perspectives, it is perhaps understandable why Nouwen was reluctant to use the term, although Schneiders description would seem to come close to Nouwen's theological *weltanschauung*. As a writer of popular texts rather than an academic in the discipline, he opts for the phrase 'the spiritual life,' defining it as 'the active presence of God's Spirit in the midst of a worry-filled existence' (Nouwen, 1982b: 93). Described by his own friends as an 'endless worrier,' Nouwen believes in drawing from his experience of anxiety in order to make points about spiritual living in the contemporary world. Moreover, the authentic spiritual life has its root in the human condition which all people (regardless of their religious belief) have in common. The core of so much human suffering, he argues, is that sense of displacement and alienation associated with disconnectedness and characterised by boredom, resentment and depression.

> One way to express the spiritual crisis of our time is to say that most of us have an address but cannot be found there. We know where we belong, but we keep being pulled away in many directions, as if we were still homeless. "All these other things" keep demanding our attention. They lead us so far from home that we eventually forget our true address, that is, the place where we can be addressed' (Nouwen, 1982b: 36-37).

LaNoue says that somehow the microcosm of Nouwen's own spiritual journey enabled him to communicate to great effect with the spiritual macrocosm of modern America. His popularity stemmed from a unique ability to describe his own spiritual struggles in such a way that many people could relate their experience to his. Accessibility was a hallmark of his writing. LaNoue notes that, as American spirituality shifted from being 'dwelling-oriented' (associated with places of belonging such as home, community and country) to 'seeking-oriented' (connected with a fervent search for spiritual meaning), Nouwen began his first teaching assignments in the United States. He did not typify the status quo as far as American Christianity was concerned. He was neither Protestant, nor of 'the old school.' He was a psychologist who spoke the language of typical late 20th century Americans and a priest committed to the changes of Vatican II. He longed for students to see the relevance of authentic Christianity as a source of truth in the midst of continual questioning and searching (LaNoue, 2000: 5).

America, then, provided an appropriate context in which to integrate his psychological and spiritual experience. George Schner argues Nouwen was more optimistic about the spiritual condition of culture than contemporaries like Louis Dupré. A profound thinker, educated and trained within a broad, European cultural background, Nouwen was skilled at harnessing a philosophical, theological and cultural analysis. Other spiritual writing of the late 20th century could be classed as too narrow - either too psychologically oriented or merely too pious. But Nouwen's writings survive in the great tradition of ascetical theology: 'Part of his gift was that he could popularise or write in a fashion that was accessible. It could have issued forth in technical books but he carried on the great Catholic tradition of being intellectually astute and spiritually sensitive. He had a flair for addressing young people, not by pandering to the currents of the day but by teaching a rendition of mainstream Catholicism in a very pertinent, culturally-critical and appropriate way' (Schner, 1997).

Contemporary western culture, Schner maintains, had closed off an established, easy access to the sense of the presence of the transcendent in the world – 'the revelation of God, God's grace, the Holy touched.' Nouwen helped people see that psychology, sociology, philosophy or theology had their place but 'if the heart, the inner person, the deepest part of the self, are not open to God, have no ears, eyes or spiritual senses to find God, the rest is of no use' (Schner, 1997). Nouwen wrote and taught at a time when, on the one hand, there was a growth of evangelical Christianity in North America and when, on the other, Christianity had sold out to the rules of other modes of discourse or explanation. Psychology or social work had overtaken theology as a dominant discourse. Nouwen made it popular again through a psychological and spiritual assessment of his audience and their needs: 'He recognised this fundamentally deep need in the closed environment of contemporary society to rediscover an opening to the transcendent. He reinvented the Christian spiritual tradition in an innovative way, adopting a rhetorical style, which was not academic, but appropriate and which got the message across' (Schner, 1997).

Michael Higgins feels Nouwen's genius lay in his 'remarkable ability' to communicate at a level of transpersonal intimacy that many spiritual writers fail to achieve comfortably. He could operate outside the narrow confines of theological discourse and could resonate with the 'disturbing dimensions' of twentieth century culture – its technological frenzy, its wild eclecticism, its obsession for efficiency and its deep spiritual displacement. 'He acted as a counterpoint to all that but, at the same time, fully understood its implications. He constantly looked at his culture and currents of change, less as threats and more as probes' (Higgins, 1997).

Nouwen's God was one he himself was still searching for, a quest which a half-believing American audience found reassuring. Richard Rohr thinks Nouwen's place in late 20th century Christian spirituality can be attributed to his ability to understand, rather than employ, the relational psychological language of North Americans. It was, Rohr argues, a psycho- spiritual understanding and explanation of things that Americans appreciate, an ability to describe inner experiences and outer states: 'Americans like subjective rather than objective language. Nouwen was very good at using subjective language while being utterly grounded in an objective transcendent

reference point. This grounded his subjective, interpersonal, relational language' (Rohr, 1997). Rohr thinks, however, that Nouwen could have written more specifically on issues of peace and justice, sexuality and ecology. 'He laid the foundation for them without really addressing them' (Rohr, 1997).

Nouwen believed that, whether they worked as pastors or preachers, Christian leaders were artists who could bind people together if they were courageous enough to give expression to their most personal concerns. The American psychologist Carl Rogers (1902 - 1987) influenced his approach to personal spiritual writing. Rogers formulated the theories of 'client-centred' counselling (or 'non-directive' therapy) which dominated the American pastoral care movement for two decades. He was highly respected by liberal Protestant clergy for devising the first systematic theory of psychotherapy. Nouwen was one of the first Catholic priests to draw on his work, especially his book, *On Becoming a Person* (1961), in which Rogers disclosed that 'the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others. This has helped me to understand artists and poets who have dared to express the unique in themselves' (Nouwen, 1979a: 74). [10]

As a psychologist himself of the heart and the soul, writing both to guide others and to discover himself, Nouwen seized on this insight. In the eyes of his editors, however, he was sometimes prone to be too much an open book: 'Nouwen liked the idea that what was most personal was most universal. We had to remind him that what was most personal was sometimes best kept private' (Mogabgab, 1997). This editorial control may have been one reason why Nouwen's books, especially those alluding to homosexuality, never betray his own inclinations.

Despite Nouwen's harnessing of the personal and the universal, he is also aware that an individual's brokenness is intimate and unique. Comparisons can be made

[10] Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, London, 1961, p.26

between two experiences of suffering but, in the long term, they bring neither consolation nor comfort: 'I am deeply convinced that each human being suffers in a way no other human being suffers' (Nouwen, 1993b: 71). Nevertheless, Nouwen believes brokenness can be befriended and 'put under the blessing' (Nouwen, 1993b: 75). Physical, mental or emotional suffering might be experienced as an intrusion but can also be claimed as an intimate companion. Healing is difficult, however, when the pain is not acknowledged and embraced.

> Although this is true of all pain, it is especially true of the pain that comes from a broken heart. The anguish and agony that result from rejection, separation, neglect, abuse and emotional manipulation serve only to paralyze us when we can't face them and keep running away from them. When we need guidance in our suffering, it is first of all a guidance that leads us closer to our pain and makes us aware that we do not have to avoid it, but can befriend it' (Nouwen, 1993b: 76).

For Nouwen, the spiritual life can be a reality only when lived 'in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now' (Nouwen, 1982b: 21). It is a constant movement between the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer. Writing about the spiritual life is 'like making prints from negatives' (Nouwen, 1980: 19). The negatives are the dark side of people's lives through which they can be put in touch with the light. Just as a photographic developer needs the negative in order to make the print, so spiritual people are called to embrace their negative experiences as a source of life: 'The spiritual life is a constant choice to let your negative experiences become an opportunity for conversion and renewal. If I can embrace my loneliness, depression or struggle in faith, I can trust that, in the middle, I find light and hope. In the world sadness and gladness are always separate. In the spiritual life sadness and gladness they are never separate' (Nouwen, 1992: BBC).

Human suffering need not be an obstacle to joy and peace, but the very means to it: 'The great secret of the spiritual life, the life of the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, is that everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity' (Nouwen, 1993b: 77). The great spiritual call of those beloved children is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the

blessing: 'Physical, mental or emotional pain lived under the blessing is experienced in ways radically different from physical, mental or emotional pain lived under the curse ... What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to deeper communion.' (Nouwen, 1993b: 79)

For Nouwen, then, suffering and joy are interconnected. Ministers can be healers only if they own their wounds and trust that God can bring good out of the sharing of them. The concept of 'The Wounded Healer', which underlay much of Nouwen's spirituality, was a paradigm of his own life: 'His image of the wounded healer is that of a person with a pierced heart' (Callahan, 1992: 133).

Annice Callahan, who knew Nouwen personally and professionally, argues that his impact on North American society was the greater for his gift of articulating what was in his heart. He felt it would profit his fellow Christians if he shared his experiences, much in the vein of Julian of Norwich.[11] He believed the language of the heart was universal, that whatever he experienced 'could somehow touch anyone else's experience'. At a time when spirituality was becoming academic, esoteric and erudite, he had 'the capacity to let his own heart be touched and to touch hearts'. As an academic himself, he had become aware of the dangers of the dissociation of mind and heart. 'His learning style was concrete-experiential, rather than abstract-reflective, although there was a reflective element. He was convinced that between the subjective and the objective lies the personal. There was a remarkable correlation between how he learned (an experiential way which left his heart very open) and how he taught (an experiential way that invited those participating to leave their hearts very open). His originality lay in his ability to contemplate his experience in faith and share the fruits of his contemplation in print' (Callahan, 1997).

Nouwen rarely showed interest in many contemporary movements of spirituality, such as feminism and eco-feminism. For Callahan, therefore, his spirituality was

[11] Julian of Norwich was born in England in 1342. During a severe illness she received a series of sixteen 'shewings' or visions of God. After meditating on the meaning of her experience, she wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love.*

timeless, completely integrated into his experience as a clinical psychologist: 'He brought together two aspects of a worldview and let them merge, unify and inform one another. I think it gave his work a certain relevance to North American society of the time. He was in a sense counter cultural at a time when the United States, in particular, was becoming a consumerist, technological society. He was a prophetic figure in the order of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day. Like him, they had the ability to let their own lives be transformed in a North American content and then, in turn, to encourage others to enter into that same transformation' (Callahan, 1997).

Over the course of nearly thirty years, the themes of loneliness, fear and alienation emerge as recurring melodies in a symphony of self-analysis and solidarity with a wounded world. Each book is a development of the previous one as Nouwen explores his insecurities with increasing anxiety and eloquence. Although he mentions many of his personal idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes, he points readers beyond their own preoccupations and towards God. Downey argues that Nouwen was nurtured in the Roman Catholic Church at a time when the 'turn to the subject' – the human person - was a governing concern in many spheres of theology and spirituality. Nouwen's writings attend the range of human experience in the light of the Mystery of God disclosed in Christ through the Spirit. But Nouwen's focus is always on the human spirit. He emphasises the 'tensive interaction' between the human spirit and the Spirit of God, but fails to give equal attention to both. Nouwen's focus, he claims, is primarily the human person. The advantage of such an approach is that the diverse nature of human experience is graced and transformed in and through the Spirit of God. But there are disadvantages, Downey argues:

> The potential danger of such an approach is that it may inadvertently canonize the self-focus, self-preoccupation, self-absorption characteristic of our age. That Henri Nouwen was a deeply complex, indeed conflicted, person is now more commonly recognized. It remains an open question whether or not Nouwen's turn to the subjectivity of his own personal experience mutes the awareness of the presence and action of God in the grand economy of salvation, that is, in the whole gamut of human life, history, world, and church.' [12]

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[12] Michael Downey, *Weavings*, vol. xiii, no 5 (Sept/Oct 1998), p. 47

Nonetheless, although autobiographical in content, his writing is never tantalisingly confessional. People feel they knew more about him than they actually do (Higgins, 1997). This is perhaps because Nouwen regards his readers as friends with whom he can share his spiritual insights:

> Each time life required me to take a new step into unknown spiritual territory, I felt a deep, inner urge to tell my story to others – perhaps as a need for companionship, but maybe, too, out of an awareness that my deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch' (Nouwen, 1990c: 12).

A missionary in South America, who worked with Nouwen, observes that, from his writings, Nouwen emerges as a secure man with great personal certainty. The reality, however, was different. 'He was, in fact, in the struggle to know and understand both himself and the God he sought to proclaim. He was on a journey of discovery'. The mystery of the person of Henri Nouwen was 'in the very humanness of his constant search for his own identity'. His genius as a spiritual guide was 'the simplicity of his own humble insecurity before God' (Byrne, 1998).

Nouwen and Homosexuality

As I have already indicated, this thesis contends that the tensions of Nouwen's emotional life, as a gay man vowed to celibacy, stoke the inner fire which drives the engine of his spiritual writings. It will argue that, while not gay texts, his books incorporate themes common to contemporary gay literature. Nouwen's own books provide a vehicle through which he considers the psychological and spiritual issues arising from his own suppressed homosexuality. His writings, then, can be viewed as part of a long process of 'coming-out' (a journey he never completed). But they are not only cathartic for him personally: as a professional spiritual guide, they also enable him to write passionately about experiences common to the human condition in general. These experiences of loneliness, alienation and longing, which seem to afflict homosexuals with a greater intensity, effectively fuel a spirituality applicable to all straight people, of whatever faith tradition.

Art often resources Nouwen's spiritual thinking about intimacy and alienation, notably the work of van Gogh and Rembrandt. But it is a black Italian marble sculpture, given to him by a little-known Canadian artist, which helps him encapsulate the essence of his struggle. It depicts two faces positioned close to each other but separated by emptiness replete with energy. There is also the presence of a deep unity: 'The bodies from which the faces emerge are united in pregnant expectation. The stone is one, yet two; long-lasting, yet fragile; full, yet empty; eternal, yet rooted in time. It is called *Communion*. The sculpture speaks to me of the great tension in my own life: the tension between a longing for closeness and a need to keep my distance'. [13]

Nouwen is more precise in *Life of the Beloved*: 'It is obvious that our brokenness is often most painfully experienced with respect to our sexuality. My own and my friends' struggles make it clear how central our sexuality is to the way we think and feel about ourselves. Our sexuality reveals to us our enormous yearning for communion. The desires of our body – to be touched, embraced and safely held – belong to the deepest yearnings of the heart and are very concrete signs of our search for oneness. It is precisely around this yearning for communion that we experience so much anguish. Our society is so fragmented, our family lives so sundered by physical and emotional distance, our friendships so sporadic, our intimacies so "in-between" things and so often utilitarian, that there are few places where we can feel truly safe' (Nouwen, 1993b: 73).

This emotional and sexual longing is, I argue, at the heart of Nouwen's predicament as a priest vowed to celibacy. For Nouwen, though, the emotional life and spiritual life have different dynamics, even though they overlap. While the turmoil of emotional life is often determined by one's past or present surroundings, the ups and downs of an individual's spiritual life depend on obedience - attentive listening - to the movements of the Spirit of God within: 'Without this listening our spiritual life eventually becomes subject to the windswept waves of our emotions' (Nouwen, 1996d: 232).

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[13] Henri Nouwen, *Touching Stone, The Sculpture of Steve Jenkinson*, Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion. Fall 1993, No. 4 p.14

My thesis, then, is a study of Nouwen's emotional and spiritual struggles. In developing the phrase 'wounded lover', I illustrate how his writings, in particular, are able to inspire lesbians and gay men in their vocations within the Christian church of the 21st century. Although my approach is ecumenical, I focus on the Roman Catholic Church's approach to homosexuality in particular. In Chapter One, covering Nouwen's life between the years 1932 and 1966, I trace the seeds of Nouwen's insecurities to childhood and the relationship with his parents. I analyse Nouwen's vocation to the priesthood and the early awareness of his homosexuality, his subsequent psychological and spiritual development, and the tentative questioning of his own goodness and self-worth while a student in his mid-thirties. Chapter 2 (1966-1974) charts Nouwen's early years in North America and his inner awareness of the forces of denial and repression in the spiritual life. While assessing the themes of Nouwen's first spiritual paperbacks, it also reveals the content of his lesser-known articles on homosexuality and his reflections on love and belonging. Nouwen's emerging concerns with his own self-identity is the focus of Chapter 3 which examines the years 1974-1984 when Nouwen was at the height of his fame as a spiritual teacher. This section also discloses the impact on Nouwen of the death of his mother and describes his struggles to reconcile the church's teaching on homosexuality with his own self-awareness at a time when the American gay rights' movement was gathering momentum.

Chapter 4 (1984-1990) discusses Nouwen's move from academia to L'Arche and his spirituality among the disabled. It also analyses his emotional breakdown after a platonic relationship with a male friend broke up and explains how he came to write some of his most memorable books during his months of therapy. In Chapter 5 (1990-1996), I show how, after his breakdown, Nouwen slowly came to accept his homosexuality through his development of gay friendships, his understanding of compassion, his work with AIDS' charities and his growing comfort with 'body theology.' During these years Nouwen had written that gay people have a unique vocation in the Christian community. The ensuing chapters explore this idea. Chapter 6 considers homosexuality as both a wound and a gift, examining the work of gay Catholic writers in the light of Nouwen's spirituality. In Chapter 7 I contrast the church's official teaching on homosexuality with the insights of Nouwen. I argue that

the spirituality of Henri Nouwen is a much more appropriate way forward for gay Christians than the teachings of the Magisterium. Nouwen helps homosexuals construct the *ecclesia spiritualis* with dignity and compassion. My conclusions reflect on how Nouwen's spirituality can give encouragement to gay Christians of the 21st century, while at the same time acknowledging that the vicissitudes of his own tortured brilliance should serve as a warning to those who are unable to own their sexuality.

1

SEEDS OF UNCERTAINTY (1932-1966)

Nouwen's Childhood and Priestly Formation

The root of Nouwen's insecurities can be traced to childhood and the relationship with his parents: he sensed a distancing from his father but an intimacy towards his mother.[13] From his earliest years, Nouwen lived with internal conflicts. He desired affection and intimacy, yet doubted human love; he strove to be faithful and popular, but needed equally to satiate his hunger for independence and uniqueness. Ambition and insecurity seemed locked in a spiritual struggle of the soul. He was a 'uniquely gregarious and anxious child' (Jonas, 1999.11). But even in the cradle he was unsettled and hyperactive, always famished. 'He bit his nails and seemed hungry for some kind of attention from parents and siblings that they could neither understand nor give' (Jonas, 1999:12). Nouwen's 'extreme need to be loved' was directly related to the relationship with his father:

> When he was running round as a boy of three, he would repeatedly ask the question, "Do you really love me?" He was always concerned that he wasn't being loved enough. That was purely psychological. He had a great deal of anxiety over that which he projected onto God. He was very vulnerable from that corner. He had a very deeply felt relationship with his mother but the relationship with his father, while not bad, was not so deeply affective (Dupre, 1997).

Further evidence is provided by Naus who was told by Nouwen's father that, as a child, Henri Nouwen would sometimes repeat the question 'Do you love me?' for days at a time. No matter how much reassurance the child received, he would continue to ask the question. Naus, a social psychologist, suggests this was a struggle about intimacy and the importance of feeling connected:

> Nouwen's mother loved him unconditionally and, as a child, he was clearly seeking the approval of his father. The restlessness had something to do with

[13] According to Beumer (p.14), Nouwen's birth was complicated by a difficult delivery, 'costing the mother and child three days and nights of struggle.' At times the lives of both were in danger and prayers were offered for a successful outcome. Beumer comments that, in view of the complications, it was not surprising that a 'very strong' bond developed between them.

> the lack of certainty about being socially connected. If a person does not know for sure whether they are connected to somebody, they flounder and rush around to convince themselves that they are, in fact, connected; that people do like, approve of and appreciate them. The demon Nouwen had to fight from the very beginning and throughout his life was the uncertainty about being loved or, more neutrally, the uncertainty about being connected (Naus, 1997).

Naus argues that Bowlby's Attachment Theory, one of the most significant theoretical developments in psychoanalysis since Freud, offers insights into determining the reasons for Nouwen's early cravings,[14] although it cannot account for all his behavioural patterns. 'Attachment' is a term referring to the overall state and quality of an individual's attachments and can be divided into 'secure attachment' and 'insecure attachment' (Holmes, 1999: 67). Like much psychodynamic language, attachment is a term with its own experiential and theoretical overtones. A person who feels attached feels safe and secure. An insecurely attached person, such as Nouwen, feels intense love and dependency as well as a fear of rejection, irritability and vigilance towards their attachment figure. It could be theorised that such a lack of security creates a desire to be close and a simultaneous determination to punish the attachment figure for the slightest sign of abandonment. While there is no evidence of such behaviour in Nouwen's childhood, it is possible to detect an ambivalent insecurity in Nouwen's adult relationships, as I shall argue in later chapters.

Attachment behaviour is defined as being any form of behaviour resulting in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual (Holmes, 1999: 68). It is triggered by separation or threatened separation from the attachment figure. Bowlby believes attachment is 'monotropic': it occurs within a single figure, usually the mother, and has profound implications for psychological development and psychopathology throughout a person's life cycle. Attachment Theory accepts that the mother is usually the main care-giver but there is nothing in

[14] John Bowlby (1907-1990) qualified in medicine, then specialised in child psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In 1946 he joined the staff of the Tavistock Clinic, London. Through his research and publications, he contributed to far-reaching changes in the way children are treated and to radically new thinking about the social and emotional development of human beings. His work on attachment theory constituted a trilogy: *Attachment, Separation, Loss*.

the theory to indicate that fathers are not equally likely to become principal attachment figures if they happen to provide most of the child care.

Nouwen's mother apologised to Henri for raising him according to the guidance of a German doctor 'who taught that the rapacious wills of young children should be broken by restrictions of food and physical touch' (Jonas, 1999: 11). This regimen might account, to some extent, for his lifelong search for intimate relationships. It is worth noting that, in his reflections on the regulation of mothering, Bowlby himself raises questions about food-intake and affection, pointing out that mothers and professional people constantly ask whether it is wise for a mother always to meet her child's demands for her presence and attention. He suggests this concern is best seen in the same perspective as the question, 'How much food is good for a child?'

> From the earliest months forward it is best to follow a child's lead. When he wants more food, it will probably benefit him; when he refuses, he will probably come to no harm. Provided his metabolism is not deranged, a child is so made that, if left to decide, he can regulate his own food-intake in regard to both quantity and quality. With few exceptions, therefore, a mother can safely leave the initiative to him.
>
> The same is true of attachment behaviour, especially during the early years. In an ordinary family in which a mother is caring for her child, no harm comes to him when she gives him as much as her presence and attention as he seems to want. Thus, in regard to mothering – as to food – a young child seems to be so made that, if from the first permitted to decide, he can satisfactorily regulate his own 'intake'. (Bowlby, 1997: 356-357)

It is possible, then, to deduce that Nouwen's mother might have been misled into following the German doctor's advice, withdrawing from her son physical touch and food. But this still cannot account for the origins of Nouwen's insecurities which were evidently already in place. Speculating on Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Naus thinks had Nouwen's attachment been secure, he would have felt supported, loved and appreciated from a very early age, predisposing him to approach other relationships later in life with confidence and trust. But this was not the pattern of his adult behaviour:[15]

[15] Erik Erikson offered a similar theory about lifespan development. The first part, *Trust versus Mistrust*, supported the notion that the early stages of the relationship between child and parent are foundational for subsequent social relationships.

> There are indications that Nouwen might not have been securely attached in that he always seemed to be searching for affection. Throughout his life he was never sure if people appreciated him. Bowlbians would tend to say Nouwen was not securely attached. But that begs the question: "Why not?" We do not have first-hand information of his childhood to give evidence for it.
>
> What I know of the relationship between Nouwen and his mother suggests there was a very strong attachment and one can only speculate why it was broken. One has to consider the possibility that, for whatever reason, Nouwen, almost at birth, had a need for security, affection and love that exceeded by far what normally could be provided for the child. No matter what the parents did, that need could not be fulfilled. It appears that something happened early in life, outside of the control of the mother or the father, that somehow threatened, or disrupted, that bond. (Naus, 1997)

The bond between Nouwen and his mother is underlined by Beumer. He indicates that Maria Nouwen 'was very attached to her oldest son' and that their relationship became 'very intimate' (Beumer, 1997: 20). It is clear from Nouwen's own writings that he had always felt closer to his mother than his father. Increasingly, he had felt a 'mysterious depth' between them:

> From her I had come to feel an unqualified acceptance which had little to do with my being good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, close by or far away. In her I had come to sense a love that was free from demands and manipulations, a love that gave me a sense of belonging that could be found nowhere else. It is hard to express exactly what I was sensing, but the word "belonging" comes closest to it. She represented a reality of goodness and safety which was much larger than herself. When, even in the midst of turmoil and restlessness, conflicts and failures, I continued to feel that life is ultimately good and benign, I knew that she had been, and still was, my teacher (Nouwen, 1984: 34).

As the mother-son relationship developed, a distance grew between Nouwen and his father (Beumer, 1997: 22). While Laurent Nouwen was proud of his son's early signs of leadership, creativity and ambition, there appears also to have been an 'unexpressed competition' between them and a 'silent battle for precedence,' combined with 'the hidden dance for the mother's attention, the unconscious

attempts to gain her favor' (Beumer, 1997: 20).[16] Laurent Nouwen explained that his son had been eager to please him but had more in common with his mother: 'He was very proud of his father and he would always try to impress me by saying, "I'm a great man, Father. I have been a success." I was very proud of his success. He was a very devoted son but also very human. He had much of his mother in him, eager, always working' (Laurent J. M. Nouwen, 1997).

Yet this desire to impress does not appear to have been met with much affirmation during Nouwen's lifetime. In an essay addressed to his father after the death of Maria Nouwen, and subsequently published as a book, Henri Nouwen writes openly of his relationship with his father, expressing sadness at the 'great distance' between them (Nouwen, 1983: 20). This can be interpreted as another expression of insecure attachment in that Nouwen is prepared to reveal publicly aspects of his father's personality. It might also have been an unconscious means of Nouwen 'punishing' his father publicly for the lack of attachment he felt as a child as he was encouraged to develop his independence from the family:

> You like to be in control, able to make your own decisions and direct your own course. Experience has taught you that displaying weakness does not create respect and that it is safer to bear your burden in secret than to ask for pity. You never strove for power and influence, and even refused many positions that would have given you national recognition, but you fiercely guarded your own spiritual, mental, and economic autonomy. Not only did you in fact achieve an impressive amount of autonomy for yourself, but you also encouraged your children to become free and independent people as soon as possible ...
>
> ...you had very little sympathy for people whom you considered 'failures'. The weak did not attract you (Nouwen, 1983: 46-47).

These extracts, then, point up the differences between Nouwen's relationship with his mother and that of his father. He associates love and attachment with his mother,

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[16] Laurent Nouwen told the story of his son in a small booklet privately printed and distributed within a small circle. It was entitled *Henri's vader vertelt: Zo maar een verhaal over een doorsnee-katholiek gezin uit de eerste helft van deze eeuw waarvan de eerstgeboren zoon bereids in zijn prille jeugd blijk gaf van zijn passie voor het priesterschap (Henri's father speaks: just the story of an average Catholic family from the first half of this century whose first-born son showed signs of a passion for the priesthood, even in his tenderest years).*

and autonomy and detachment with his father. For Nouwen, detachment is not the opposite of autonomy but its fruit (Nouwen, 1983: 49). These contrasting parental characteristics may have been foundational in creating Nouwen's lifelong dilemma between yearning to be close to people and needing to keep his distance from them, a theme which reverberates throughout his writings and in the conversations with his friends. One American friend senses that Nouwen's father failed to show his son understanding or sensitivity in childhood: 'The Second World War had broken out and his father was in the most important years of his career. The Dutch culture of that period meant that he did not show much affection. I think Nouwen's heart was so sensitive that he could not abide it and suffered so much'.[17] A Dutch friend adds: 'Henri was always distressed by his father's attitude towards him. He told me that his father did not have any real respect for him and always tried to diminish his talents. Henri was very, very wounded by his father'.[18]

Laurent Nouwen has, however, a more nuanced perspective of his elder brother's relationship with his father: 'Henri had tremendous respect for his father. He was demanding and expected excellence because of his own extraordinary intelligence and mastery of his own field of financial law. Henri was always trying to live up to what he thought was his father's expectations of him as the eldest son. In *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, my brother writes about the hands of the father in the Rembrandt painting, one masculine, one feminine. I think that would provide a clue about the role his parents played in his life' (Laurent Nouwen, 1997).

The significance of the painting on Nouwen's spiritual life, not least in terms of his own feelings of jealousy and resentment, is discussed in Chapter 4. But Donald Cozzens' re-consideration of Freud's oedipal complex, especially as it relates to underlying feelings of jealously among young priests, is relevant here to this discussion of Nouwen's formative years. [19] If the complex is approached through an

[17] The friend requested anonymity.

[18] The friend requested anonymity.

[19] In 2000 the Reverend Donald Cozzens, president-rector and professor of pastoral theology at St Mary's Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Cleveland, Ohio, published a controversial book, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, in which he acknowledged the presence of an increasing number of homosexuals on seminary training programmes.

iconic or metaphorical reading, Cozzens argues, it can shed light on the unspoken, unnamed tensions bubbling below the surface in the life of a priest. In this light, Oedipus desires to be his mother's only love. However, his gradual awareness of the special adult-to-adult intimacy his mother and father share 'shakes the foundations of his psychic security' (Cozzens, 2000: 50). Oedipus cannot tolerate less than his mother's exclusive love and total attention. The child is jealous not only of his father but of his siblings who are all competitors. He resolves the conflict by starting to identify with the father, accepting his authority, but remains prone to desiring to be the centre of the world, to be loved and admired as no one else, to be special. All these traits are identifiable in Nouwen. Cozzens says that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, this drive to be special is *the* original sin. Oedipal envy, whose roots are buried deep in the 'sludge' of Oedipal pride, proposes a psychoanalytic equivalent to the Christian doctrine of original sin. In this scenario, the innocent, self-satisfying bliss of pre-Oedipal drama awakens ego-awareness. A new reality must be faced. 'I am not the center of it all, after all. I am *not* God. I am not omnipotent. I am vulnerable, dependent' (Cozzens, 2000: 52). There is, however, no evidence that Nouwen was displaying signs of this complex in his early years but, from what he writes about his inner struggles in later life, it is not unreasonable to assume that something of the oedipal lay under the surface for much of his priesthood.

Sullivan notes that while the range of homosexual experience is vast, certain patterns are common: an often deep and powerful bond with a mother and an estranged relationship with a father (Sullivan, 1998: 122). Considering the reparative theorists' argument that homosexuality is a pathology which can be overcome by the re-ignition of latent heterosexual feelings, Sullivan argues in objection that the early family pattern that this school outlines is not a cause of homosexuality but a result of it. As a gay boy develops, his difference is intuited by his mother and father. The boy feels intuitively out of place with other heterosexual boys, withdraws, 'feminizes' in response and seeks a natural refuge with the mother: 'The father, more often than not, perceives this withdrawal as a rejection and reacts by further distancing the boy from his own interest and affection, thus further feminizing the child. In a subsequent, defensive move, the mother protects her son more emphatically, thus perpetuating the vicious circle even further. The result is certainly for many gay children a traumatic and disturbing development, in which they endure considerable

unhappiness and natural confusion about the nature of their gender identity' (Sullivan, 1998: 122).

In view of Nouwen's subsequent trust in his mother's love and my thesis that Nouwen's spirituality appealed to gay men because of its feminine characteristics, Sullivan's observations are certainly worth reflecting on. But it does not appear that Nouwen was exactly confused about his own gender identity: a friend reveals that, as a boy, Nouwen simultaneously felt a calling to the priesthood and an awareness of his homosexual orientation: 'He once told a therapist that he could recall having homosexual feelings at the age of six which was about the same time that he had made up his mind that he was going to be ordained'.[20]

Nouwen's uncle, Monsignor A. C. Ramselaar, was his priestly inspiration. This is apparent from his later writings in which he also seems to have had an early attraction to male authority figures:

> Since I was six years old, I had felt a great desire to be a priest. Except for a few fleeting thoughts of becoming a navy captain, mostly because of the influence of the men with their blue and white uniforms and golden stripes parading the railroad platform of our town, I always dreamt about one day being able to say Mass, as my uncle Anton did (Nouwen, 1996b: 13-14).

Nouwen's relationship with his uncle was more than merely familial: 'It was one of his first primary experiences of attraction but within a mystical context' (Colby, 1998). 'Even before entering the Church, Nouwen was learning about sexuality and identity in the language of mysticism and service. He was in love with his uncle as an embodiment of mystery, as an embodiment of Jesus and as an attractive charismatic figure. His uncle was the seed of everything Henri wanted to grow into and far surpassed in a lot of ways'. Nouwen's desire to emulate his uncle was expressed

[20]The friend requested anonymity.

through self-confident role-play as a 'child-priest', although by this time he had also known humiliation.[21]

While seminary training in the 1950s brought out the gifts of the spirit, it kept in check the desires of the body. Colby points out that 'a rigid Jansenism' was operational in Dutch seminaries at that time: 'the body was always sinful, in error and not to be trusted (Colby, 1998).[22] Nouwen once told Colby that, in the seminary, the body was 'the mule to be whipped on the way to the kingdom'. The experience of an all-male environment served only to distance opportunities for close friendship and male intimacy:

> In his early formation as a teenager he was told to shower with a light robe so he would never be fully naked, to sleep with his hands folded on his chest above the bedcovers so even in sleep he would not accidentally touch himself and give himself pleasure, to avoid any kind of particular friendship and relationship. If any intimacy got too close he was to pull away from it because it was leading him away from the kingdom and from his work and service. It set up a double contradiction: Nouwen was always suspicious of his own body's longings and his personal satisfaction was always contrary to the good of the community (Colby, 1998).

Recollections of former seminarians and teachers in Holland testify to a competent individual with prestige on his side. Opinions of him vary: 'He did not stand out but neither did he seem to feel at ease' (Bunnik, 1998). 'In view of the fact that he had a

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[21] Nouwen's family remembered him as an energetic child, always moving about. He was also cross-eyed and clumsy, feeling humiliated at school when chosen last for the sports team. Yet at the same time he seems to have displayed early bargaining skills. His brother, Paul, recollected: 'If his friends wanted to play Cowboys and Indians, he would consent to the less popular role as an Indian on condition that his friends, in turn, would become his altar servers while he played the part of the priest saying Mass' (Paul Nouwen, 1997). Nouwen had a child-size altar built and the family seamstress made small vestments for him. By the age of eight, Henri Nouwen had converted the attic into a children's chapel where he gave sermons to his parents and relatives. For his services, he inaugurated an entire hierarchy of bishops, priests, deacons and altar servers. His grandmother bought him chalices and patens. 'In his youth God called him to be a priest and so he became a priest. My parents did not push him. He studied the Mass, learnt all the words and used bread and wine for his mock services. I think he was a priest from the beginning' (Paul Nouwen, 1997).

[22] The movement owes its name to Cornelius Otto Jansen (1585-1638), a leading theologian of Louvain who became Bishop of Ypres in 1636. Its principal teachings are that grace is irresistible, that, on occasion, even righteous people may sin through insufficient grace; that strict disciplines should be observed in sacramental life (for example, in Confession, the penitent should never be given the benefit of the doubt through casuistry; and that the moral life of the Christian should not make concessions to the self such as going to the theatre, or indulging in any luxury are vices to be condemned).

famous priest as an uncle gave him an aura which was both social and charismatic. He outshone everyone with his powers of expression and theological insight. He had a charism of being easy to approach and he talked with people freely. He was elected senior by his fellow seminarians' (Ter Steeg, 1997).' His intellect was not very original but very sharp. He was always making notes during the classes and, when he handed them in, I discovered that they were better than what I had said in the lessons. Nothing passed him by. He did very well in his exams and I was absolutely persuaded that he would be a fine priest' (Haarsma, 1997).

Whatever the nature of Nouwen's relationship with his father, it is apparent that, as a young seminarian, he showed few signs of the anxiety and doubt which had emerged during his childhood. Yet, among his contemporaries, there were those who observed that, for all his outer confidence, there were definite signs of inner loneliness. Ter Steeg recognised Nouwen's need for close companionship in an environment where students were encouraged to be friends with everyone but no one in particular: 'Henri was looking for friends. It was a climate more of comradeship than real friendship but I noticed that he was craving for friendship. He would come along to you and have a talk on a very friendly basis and he was able to demonstrate affection. Another symptom of his need for intimacy could be detected in the invitations he would offer other seminarians to go and visit him and his family during the holidays' (Ter Steeg, 1997).

Both the family home and the seminary were enclosed environments where Nouwen felt secure. He once described his first 24 years as constituting 'The Safe Home' period of his life, protecting him from the world. During that time he had related exclusively to Roman Catholics. According to Nouwen, it was a period when all the lines of demarcation were clearly in force:

> These very clear boundaries gave me a sense of being in the right place, being wholly protected and being very safe. I never met anybody who was divorced, who had left the priesthood or who was gay. It was very clear what I was going to do as a priest. I knew the right teaching and the right way to live the moral life (Nouwen, *My History with God*).

Nouwen believed that life in the garden of his youth had given him invaluable gifts including a christological understanding of religion: 'a joyful spirit, a deep devotion for Jesus and Mary, a true desire to pray, a great love for theology and spirituality, a good knowledge of contemporary languages, a serious interest in scripture and the early Christian writers, an enthusiasm about preaching, and a very strong sense of vocation. My maternal grandmother, my paternal grandparents, my parents, friends, and teachers all encouraged me to trust my desire to live a life of Jesus for others' (Nouwen, 1996b: 16).

The outer wall of protection and inner sense of priestly calling was combined with a determination on Nouwen's part to be different from other priests: to carve out an independent path, as his father had encouraged. Nouwen's recollection of receiving a golden chalice at his ordination underlines both this spirit of autonomy and loyalty to his family: 'Most of my classmates had chalices made for their ordination. I was an exception. My Uncle Anton, who was ordained in 1922, offered me his chalice as a sign of his gratitude that a new priest had come into our family. It was beautiful, made by a famous Dutch goldsmith and adorned with my grandmother's diamonds' (Nouwen, 1996b: 16).

At his first Mass, the chalice became a means of spiritual intimacy, almost a substitute for close friendship: 'After the consecration I lifted it high above my head so that the sisters could see it. And during communion, after having taken and given the consecrated bread, I drank from it as the only one allowed to do so at that time. It was an intimate and mystical experience. The presence of Jesus was more real for me than the presence of any friend could possibly be' (Nouwen, 1996b: 109-110).

Drawing again on an iconic reading of the Oedipus myth, Cozzens argues that ordination, especially in the celibate world of the Catholic Church, can constellate a fresh Oedipal configuration which he terms a 'presbyteral Oedipal complex' (Cozzens, 2000: 54). An oedipal triangle is revealed with the newly ordained priest as the son, the diocesan bishop as the father and the Church as the mother. It is common for bishops to thank parents for the gift of their sons to the Church. They are encouraged to trust in the Church's solicitude: the Church will love their sons as a mother loves her children, the bishop will care for them as a father looks after his

sons and fellow priests become his brothers in a new psychic birthing and archetypal covenant:

> Often, it appears, the priest naively enters into the fellowship of his new sacramental family with little understanding of the struggles and conflicts which await him. Family life after Freud, we now know, is far more complex than previously understood. All the psychic forces we know to be at work in the family of origin – unconscious jockeying to be the parents' favorite, sibling rivalry, willful ambition – all these negative dynamics are now in place and ready to erupt in the life of the newly ordained priest (Cozzens, 2000: 54-55).

These characteristics emerge from time to time in Nouwen's life, as I shall show. At this stage it is important to acknowledge that Nouwen's ordination and spiritual development coincided with Roman Catholicism's own maturation.[23] This was a time of change for the Church as well as for Nouwen. Preparations were beginning for the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) which was to inaugurate a period of renewal in the Church, especially in terms of catechetics, ecumenism and pastoral methodology, areas in which Nouwen took particular interest. The Dutch church's National Pastoral Council drew up proposals for a married priesthood which Rome declared unacceptable. It was within a Dutch church heralded as being in the vanguard of Catholicism's future that Nouwen lived out his early years of priesthood as a trainee psychologist. His decision to study psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen after his ordination, rather than serve as a parish priest, showed Nouwen able to negotiate his own terms from an early age. Some fellow seminarians interpreted this as favouritism in view of Nouwen's being the nephew of

[23] Nouwen had grown up in a country which had known a Christian presence since Roman times (circa the sixth century) when the Rhine was the northern boundary of the empire. Two Irish monks (Willibrord, d.739, and Boniface, d.754) evangelised the north and Willibrord became Bishop of Utrecht in 695. Normans in the ninth century had sacked cities and ejected clergy, while the Middle Ages had seen Christian culture preserved through a flourishing monastic life. At the time of the Reformation, William of Orange's overthrow of Spanish rule had been accompanied by the rejection of Catholicism in the north and the acceptance of Calvinism. Catholic churches became Dutch Reformed; many statues and frescoes were obliterated. While the southern provinces had remained strongly Catholic, both Rome and the Dutch government had classed Holland as a Protestant country. Losing its hierarchy in 1580, it was administered by the Vatican office of the Propagation of the Faith until 1853. The Catholic Church had suffered severe penal restrictions from 1583-1795, during which time a minority of Catholics connected with Jansenism. They were censored by Rome and eventually formed the Church of Utrecht (known as The Old Catholics). The self-emancipation of Dutch Catholics developed from 1853 through education, politics and a Catholic press. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, nearly 40 per cent of the Dutch population was Catholic.

a famous Dutch priest. It may account for a certain distancing between Dutch clergy and Nouwen in the years which followed.[24] His spiritual writings have failed to win significant acclaim in his homeland.[25]

The year 1957 was a turning point in Nouwen's life as he moved from the securities of family and church to an environment where the boundaries were not so strictly defined. In the years which followed, he discovered that

> Protestants belong as much to the church as Catholics, and that Hindus, Buddhists and Moslems [sic] believe as much in God as Christians, that pagans can love one another as much as believers, that the human psyche is multidimential, that theology, psychology and sociology are intersecting in

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[24] There is a discrepancy in the recording of what actually happened, revealing that, at times, Nouwen's recollection of events, for whatever reason, was not always consistent. In one book, Nouwen states: 'I have very vivid memories of my first year at the University of Nijmegen in Holland. I had just been ordained a priest and Cardinal Alfrink had sent me to the Catholic university to work for a degree in psychology' (Nouwen, 1996b: 79). But Beumer (1998) discloses that Alfrink, who was in fact not then a cardinal, had actually assigned Nouwen to theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. Nouwen 'had other plans and presented another program to the bishop' (p.23). Alfrink 'was not the kind of man to refuse this sort of request from his priests' (p.24). As Nouwen is known to checked and corrected the facts of Beumer's study, it must be assumed that the Beumer account is accurate. But Nouwen's own words, however ambiguous, could certainly be interpreted as though it had been Alfrink who had suggested he read psychology and Nouwen had obediently followed. According to Bunnik (1998), the support Nouwen received from the church hierarchy irritated some fellow clergy, especially those from less privileged backgrounds.

[25] Nouwen remained a priest of the archdiocese of Utrecht throughout his life but had an ambiguous relationship with the church there. In the 1960s he was seen as a progressive and socially-oriented priest, while many of his colleagues were conservative. In the 1970s and 80s, as he was discovering the value of spirituality in America, many Dutch priests were becoming more political about the way the church was being run. In Nouwen's eyes, this approach relegated or ignored the spiritual altogether. To many of his fellow priests in Holland, Nouwen had become a pious conservative, frightened of making a stand on social issues because, according to Bunnik (1998) he wanted to be friends with the right, left and middle, a pattern which developed throughout his ministry. For several years during and immediately after the Second Vatican Council, the Dutch Catholic Church was considered the advance guard of the future of Catholicism, an image which faded with the onset of internal dissension and polarisation. Nouwen's bishop at the time of his death, Cardinal Adrianus Simonis, says he could understand Nouwen's subsequent lack of popularity in The Netherlands where many priests became 'anti-hierarchic, anti-celibate and anti-the moral doctrine of the church. They wanted him to take positions in discussions but he would not do that' (Simonis, 1997). But a friend, requesting anonymity, states that the tensions arose because 'Nouwen had been allowed to roam the world while they had to stay behind and live within the Dutch context with all its problems'. Bunnik (1998) comments that Nouwen was too restless and insufficiently systematic to take part in debates about the renewal of the church. 'He considered the discussions necessary and he did not deny ecclesiastical structures could hedge in and enfeeble the Gospel message. But he did not see it as his vocation to take an active role in trying to change them. He did not like the gun smoke the discussions inevitably engender. He was a man of personal spirituality which starts from the individual person and returns to it. A question, which I cannot really answer but which has to be asked, is whether the deepening of personal insights carries with it the risk of isolating people from their ecclesiastical and social contexts. It may lead to the fragmentation of the self and such an emphasis may jump on the dubious bandwagon of present-day individualism' (Bunnik, 1998).

> many places, that women have a real call to ministry, that homosexual people have a unique vocation in the Christian community, that the poor belong to the heart of the church and the spirit of God blows where it wants. All of these discoveries gradually broke down many fences that had given me a safe garden, and made me deeply aware that God's covenant with God's people includes everyone. For me personally, it was a time of searching, questioning and often agonizing. A time that was extremely lonely and not without moments of great inner uncertainty and ambiguity. The Jesus I had come to know in my youth had died (Nouwen, *My History with God*).

Nouwen's Psychological Development

In the western Europe of the late fifties and early sixties, psychology was starting to replace religious and moral guidance as the primary method for relieving mental disorders; psychologists and psychiatrists were being increasingly viewed as 'the new priesthood.' Clergy had begun undertaking psychological training but there were concerns that their counselling techniques would become increasingly psychological at the expense of the spiritual. It was rare, but not unknown, for Roman Catholic priests to enter the field of psychology. Nouwen was among a number of priest-students who could already discern connections between ministerial theology and a variety of new disciplines. Yet at the same, he had engineered a different path from other priests. Cozzens notes that the first years after ordination are relatively free of Oedipal conflict because the newly ordained priest is buoyed up by his bishop's unequivocal affirmation. While the sheer number of brother priests can cloud the illusion of being special, the oedipally-troubled priest can still, irrationally, seek the special approval of the bishop-father which seems to have happened in Nouwen's case. Cozzens stresses that while the maternal Church can appear supportive, it can also be demanding and controlling of a priest:

> His sexuality is restrained, his dress is determined, his residence assigned. The mother wants him for herself. The defining decisions most men make as they claim their personal ground as men are denied. At the same time, the ecclesial mother in partnership with his father-bishop provides identity, status, and security. Add to this the rich and meaningful life of pastoral leadership and service and you have the makings of a well-established Oedipal conflict. The strong undercurrents of anxiety and restlessness easily go unnamed and if they remain unnamed, as a matter of course, lead to a simmering envy and rage that for the most part remain just below the boiling point (Cozzens, 2000: 56).

Cozzens argues that an iconic reading of the oedipal drama as 'reconstellated in the unconscious of the newly ordained' should suggest the formation of a template to unmask the psychic challenges and ordeals that befall priests. The naming of these difficulties is vital. Non-negotiated oedipal conflict makes the priest vulnerable to doubts about his own identity and integrity as well as his capacity for authentic, life-giving relationships. Aware of 'chronic inner disquietude, and unable to name its origin,' he will intensify his spiritual life. Recognising and accepting the unconscious conflict allows grace and healing to 'anoint his psychic wound and transform his troubled spirit'. The Oedipus wound, from the family of origin and the ecclesial or presbyteral drama, are grounded in the primal wound of original sin (Cozzens, 2000: 56-57).

It is possible to recognise at least some of these traits in Nouwen at this time. His own state of mind in the years after his ordination was a mixture of anxiety and confidence. 'He was nervous but very interested in people. Seeing one person, his eyes would always go to another. He had a big curiosity to discover the outside world'.[26] His fascination with people and flair for networking were underlain by anxiety according to Naus: 'When he had something in mind that he wanted to do or achieve, he knew how to make the connections, especially in his work between Roman Catholics. I think some people would have said he was trying to make a name for himself but that's not how I saw it. The graduation party was one of the few times I saw him unequivocally happy. Even if he was having a good time, there was usually an undertone of seriousness, nervousness or lack of relaxation. But on this occasion he seemed to have no restrictions or ties' (Naus, 1997). Evidence of Nouwen's independent will is offered by his former professor: 'Nouwen was told by the university that, in order to be awarded a full doctorate in psychology, he needed to include more statistical evidence and scientific evaluation in his research. Nouwen was furious and refused to co-operate, feeling he was being forced in a straitjacket' (Berger, 1997). Nouwen received the degree of Doctorandus which represents all the work done for a doctorate, except the dissertation. The scientific value of psychology did not appeal to him but he felt the issues accommodated within the academic

[26] The friend asked to remain anonymous.

framework of the subject were of utmost importance to the church and theology: 'The purely human side of faith had become much too entangled in church structures and ritual, threatening, from a pastoral point of view, to stifle human development'. (Beumer, 1997: 24). Influenced by the work of Han Fortmann and Gordon Allport,[27] Nouwen forged an interest in the relationship between religion and pastoral psychology, undertaking a range of roles to broaden his experience.[28] His decision to go to the United States in to study religion and psychiatry at the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas, arose partly as a result of his ability to network.[29]

Nouwen's move to America in 1964 inaugurated a new phase in his life and pushed the boundaries back even further. There was already a climate of animosity between psychology and theology: psychologists tended to interpret religious belief as

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[27] Han Fortmann (1912-1970) was a Dutch priest and psychologist of religion. According to Beumer (p.24), he had a great influence on Nouwen at Nijmegen, Fortmann was professor in general and comparative psychology of religion and culture. His major work, *Als ziende de Onzienlijke* (*On Seeing the Invisible*) was published in 1964. Beumer notes that Fortmann wrote a short book on action and contemplation, themes which were to emerge in Nouwen's work. Gordon Allport (1897-1967) was an American psychologist and a pioneer in the study of personality and the psychology of religion. He emphasised the individual nature of personality and the uniqueness of the individual, focusing on the development of a theory of personality, neither psychoanalytic nor behavouristic. Allport also studied the difference between mature and immature religion, developing the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religion His major works are *The Individual and His Religion* (1950) and *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954).

[28] Nouwen joined a work placement programme in the mines of South Limburg and another at Unilever, Rotterdam. He served as a reserve army chaplain in the psychiatric service in The Hague and held an unpaid position with the Catholic Emigration Service as a chaplain for the shipowners of the Holland-America line. It offered him a free passage to the United States.

[29] The Menninger Foundation was founded by Karl Menninger and his brother, William, who pioneered methods of psychiatric treatment in the United States. Their work attempted to merge the psychoanalytic understanding of behaviour in the treatment of hospital patients with the use of the hospital's social environment so all members of the clinic's staff – nurses, therapists, orderlies and housekeepers –could have a role to play in helping the mentally ill recover. The foundation practised Clinical Pastoral Education, a programme of professional training through the long-term supervision of ministers and theological students with men and women suffering mental illness in hospitals, prisons and social agencies. Nouwen knew he would be able to combine psychology and theology in a more practical way that he could in Holland and sensed the practitioners of the respective disciplines did not regard each other suspiciously as they tended to elsewhere. Nouwen also made connections with Seward Hiltner who was undertaking pioneering work in pastoral theology at Princeton and taught at Menninger. Hiltner once recalled: 'I still have nearly 200 pages of a not quite completed, thoroughly realistic, but extraordinary account of Henri Nouwen's ministry to one particular person during the Menninger period. This was an offender before the law, young, with many of the usual handicaps of family and social background. Nouwen neither attempted nor made any heroic interventions. But he stuck with his young patient to understand everything he possibly could. The unpublished "case history" is a model not only of careful reporting but also of professional-level concern. The Menninger Foundation mix of theory and practice was apparently just what Henri Nouwen wanted and needed at the time' (Seward Hiltner, Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Pastoral Theologian of the Year* (*Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 1, Fall 1978).

neurosis, while theologians were still distrustful of the study of human behaviour (Beumer, 1997: 27). The harnessing of the two disciplines appealed to Nouwen and his main influences in the psychological field were Protestant. Beumer records that it was at Menninger that Nouwen claimed to have become 'spiritually adult' (Beumer, 1997: 28).

However, when Nouwen's former supervisor, Professor William Berger, who taught psychology of culture and religion at Nijmegen, visited Menninger in 1965, he encountered two divergent evaluations of him: 'Seward Hiltner was very much in praise of him and this had something to do with the fact that he was giving lectures, addressing the spiritual life and fascinating students at a time of revolution when young people were rebelling against institutionalised religion. He was one of the people who could overcome that resistance. His business was spirituality and he usually wore his collar in those days. But the famous Dutch psychologist Paul Pruyser convinced me that he did not expect much scientific work from Henri Nouwen. Pruyser said Nouwen was too full of himself and I don't believe he changed his mind. Highly precise and scientific psychology was far from the bat of Henri Nouwen. He had an enormous spiritual hunger which was so overwhelming that he had no patience in wasting his time and energy doing scientific work. He was on the frontier between the educational and psychological sciences, more a preacher than a researcher' (Berger, 1997).

Nevertheless, Nouwen's psychiatric research proved influential. The case studies provided him with material for his first serious writings and from 1964 we can trace Nouwen's intensity of interest in psychological suffering, especially that of alienation, loneliness and inner struggle. The Menninger Institute was the birthplace of pastoral psychology, developing programmes in clinical pastoral education. Students divided their time between theory and supervised work with patients in a hospital or psychiatric institution. Nouwen's notes from the time indicate a priest keen to make connections between his acute observations of external experience and the fluctuations of his own inner world:

> After some months you start to experience many attitudes in the team and you must realize that it is more the prevailing attitude that determines your

> mood than the presence or absence of special attitudes. I felt a lot of hostility and friendship, a lot of resistant and support, a lot of denial and confirmation, a lot of evasiveness and frankness, etc. All these feelings and attitudes were present and operative. The balance changed every little moment just as the balance in your own feelings (Nouwen, *The Psychiatric Team*).

It is easy to detect in Nouwen's note-taking a particular interest in anxiety, a recurring theme of his subsequent spiritual writings. His work among psychiatric patients 'aroused a lot of anxiety in me'. (Nouwen, *The Psychiatric Team*). Only after some months did he realise how much anxiety existed in his relationships with the patients, especially in terms of the length of time spent with each person and concerns over formulating the right questions. Anxiety, he deduced, prevented real sympathy and empathy because, through its own self-interest, it limited any capacity to be receptive to others. The notes also reveal a priest anxious about whether or not he is liked by the patients and the extent to which he needs them.

> In as far as this anxiety was and still is conscious I realize my preoccupation with the question is how far the patient likes you or not. To me this is one of the most frustrating preoccupations especially while the infantile quality of it is so obvious. It resulted in a too explicit attitude and an impatient reaction, a need to establish a personal intimate relationship as soon as possible, hereby sometimes forgetting how sick the patient was. So the anxiety limited also the capacity to see the patient as the patient exactly because anxiety reverses the processes and makes the chaplain a patient who needs the other. One of the possibilities of the pastoral training to me is the chance to see in yourself the effects of anxiety. Especially the awareness of a need to be satisfied by the patients is very painful but very helpful (Nouwen, *The Patients*).

Here, then, are the seeds of his own understanding of 'wounded healing'. But of even greater significance are Nouwen's comments about the patients he was attracted to during his three months on three wards. Nouwen (who was 32 at the time) notes he has a preference for pastoring patients aged 20 to 35 and those who can 'verbalize their feelings' (Nouwen, *The Patients*). He also states that 'neurotic or borderline schizophrenic and sociopathic' patients seem 'more "attractive"' than severely depressed or chronic schizophrenic patients. He adds: 'These selection criteria show very clearly how much projection and identification played a role in my pastoral concern. In fact, I had much contact with other patients, too, but they did not really concern me so much as these. In a way I consider the possibility to identify with a patient as a positive trait' (Nouwen, *The Patients*). It is reasonable to conclude,

therefore, that Nouwen recognised his own neurotic tendencies at this stage of his life and his own struggles with identity which might account for the paradoxes of his own personality, especially his changes of mood. Nonetheless, he believed clinical training could help him break through the boundaries of age, education and neurosis. The Catholic chaplains were left to minister to Catholic patients. The Protestant chaplains were assigned to all other patients. This led Nouwen to question the legalism of the Roman Catholic Church. It is possible to discern within his notes an inner struggle over his vow of celibacy:

> The Catholic patients on the one hand make it very ease for the priest because of their pretty clear-cut ideas about what a priest is, does or wants. On the other hand they limit his possibilities because of their limited expectations. Therefore, I felt that one of the most difficult things for a priest who limits his pastoral care to the Catholic patients is to help them utilize the priest in a way which is broader than their own biases:
>
> A Catholic who goes to church every Sunday, who has a marriage contracted with a Catholic wife in a Catholic church, who gives his children a Catholic education and who has enough self-discipline to go to the sacraments: confession and communion on a regular basis, not to eat meat on Friday and not to become involved in forbidden sexual practices more or less anticipates that he has nothing to talk about with the priest (Nouwen, *The Patients*).

Nouwen does not want to be perceived as the holy-man who is above the group, who lives according to the 'difficult laws' and who by his celibacy is the 'personification of the difficult virtue of purity.' It is not only patients who have legalistic expectations of the priest but also 'the priest himself has to struggle with the legalistic expectations of himself' (Nouwen, *The Patients*).

Furthermore, at a time when the Second Vatican Council was formulating a more open approach to ecumenism, Nouwen notes that the unhealthy division of Christianity is highlighted in a hospital context. As a member of a team, a Catholic priest who singles out Catholics as special patients in a group plays an unhealthy role in a therapeutic group process, evoking 'sectarian feelings and stress by his presence, separation instead of union' (Nouwen, *The Patients*). Even within a hospital ward, Nouwen's lifelong struggle over intimacy and distance are projected on to a pastoral situation. He notes that much of his own pastoral gratification has a legalistic flavour. Catholic priests like to be good friends with the people but they don't tend to pray

with them individually, give personal blessings or share personal feelings: 'The image therefore is mostly that of an optimistic good willing sociable man who is better in a group of people than in a one to one relationship' (Nouwen, *The Patients*). Pastoral clinical training, building on the Protestant tradition of 'deep conviction of the power of the word and of deep respect for the faith of the individual offers a tremendous contribution to the Catholic pastoral care'. This 'apostolate of the presence' bypasses legal boundaries and, as a binding force, creates a feeling of belonging (Nouwen, *The Patients*).

Nouwen's notes on supervision during his hospital placement throw light on his own self-perception. He sees supervision as a process of confronting his weakness and pain, an occasion for discovering that it is possible to distance oneself from the pastoral situation and consider other approaches 'without causing detachment' and learning that 'involvement is possible without causing blindness'(Nouwen, *Supervision*). Nouwen expresses concern that while at one level he can understand the individual dynamics of a patient's behaviour, at another he seems only to be able to relate to him within a patient- pastor model:

> I feel that it is extremely difficult to have patience, to wait, to delay, to expect, to listen, to move slow. This is a very complicated problem because it is an attitudinal problem and at the same time a problem that concerns the core of the relationship with the mentally ill person…
>
> Working with a person who is a person like me who cannot be pushed, changed, repaired, maintained like a car, and working with a person who in a way is not like me because he is in a hospital and cannot guide his own life is an extremely delicate art (Nouwen, *Supervision*).

The 'anti-projective regime', whereby the supervisor invites the trainee to take back his projections and discuss them, characterises the process for Nouwen who reflects: 'There are many subtle ways to project. Mostly you are not aware of your inclinations to draw people or situations in the picture behind which you are hiding yourself. In a way the only thing a supervisor does is to bring yourself back in the center' (Nouwen, *Supervision*). Nouwen displays 'extreme sensitivity' for confidentiality, a reaction he attributes to American society where privacy is more a curse than a jewel, where 'everybody is ready to say extremely nice things to everybody but where real deep friendship is a seldom phenomenon' (Nouwen,

Supervision). His experience of individual supervision and group seminars 'made me insecure and gave me the feeling that I better be careful what I say in supervision because you never know how it will be used' (Nouwen, *Supervision*).

The influence of Anton Boisen was central to Nouwen's pastoral psychological development and foundational to his writings about the minister as 'the wounded healer'. In his clinical work Boisen had tried to lead students towards deeper theological insight by teaching them, in hospital settings, to view psychiatric patients as 'living human documents' whose pain and healing could cast light on the nature of religious experience. Nouwen believed that any theological discussion of such a case method could not be detached from Boisen's own life history. By studying Nouwen's approach to Boisen, we learn much about Nouwen's own concerns. Many of the matters which he reports were to have an almost parallel bearing on his own life in the years which followed. One of Nouwen's first observations concerns intimacy: Boisen's preoccupied mind and distant personality made it 'difficult to feel close to him'(Nouwen, *Boisen*). He then details Boisen's psychotic breakdown and prophetic chaplaincy in a psychiatric hospital, concluding: 'Even after the recovery from his major breakdown, he remained a patient and suffered from the basic conflicts involved all through his life. But his own suffering offered him the core insights of the clinical training movement and became the source of inspiration for new views in the psychology of religion'.(Nouwen, *Boisen*). Nouwen notes Boisen's vocational restlessness, yet he would never have become the father of the clinical training movement had he himself not entered the wilderness of the lost. Boisen's own breakdown became the beginning of a new life, his psychosis the centre of his identity. Boisen's words –'To be plunged as a patient into a hospital for the insane may be tragedy or it may be an opportunity. For me it has been an opportunity' – became the focal experience of his life and offered new light on the inter-relatedness of mental disorder and religious experience:

> His active, well-trained mind went to work as soon as possible and all through his hospitalization, notwithstanding serious relapses, he kept asking the question: What does this mean and especially what does this mean for me, a minister who is trained in the psychology of religion? With an amazing sharpness, Boisen studied and analyzed his own case and was able to find, time and again, enough distance to formulate the main insights which would guide his future life. Although Boisen himself never denied that he suffered

> from a mental illness (he denied an organic cause), his whole life became a witness to the idea that his experience was part of a plan which made him find his vocation (Nouwen, *Boisen*).

It is fair to conclude, then, that Nouwen's own experiential writing, especially as it related to psychological suffering, was inspired by Boisen. Nouwen was also intrigued by the relationship between Boisen and his parents. With his own family circumstances clearly in mind, Nouwen observes that Boisen dedicates 'some of the most beautiful' passages of his autobiography to his mother, but is disappointed that he allowed 'only a rather distant look at her' (Nouwen, *Boisen*). He reports that, at all the turning points of Boisen's life, his father (or the memory of him) is there to guide him and co-determine the road he will take:

> This ideal image of the perfect and severe father entered into many of the relationships with his teachers, his muse, and finally with God. It played a role in his decisions to study languages, to go into forestry and to enter the ministry. This relationship with his father is a major thread through his life; it is the source of a great strength but also of great suffering.

> Anton carried with him the heritage of these two parents, a gentle, retiring mother, who relied more on persuasion and compulsion, and an energetic, domineering father, whose sense of order and discipline was stronger than his patience and tolerance. The sensitivity of his mother and sense of systematic inquiry of his father both became a part of him. And in many ways we can see his life as a struggle to reconcile and integrate these often polar characteristics (Nouwen, *Boisen*).

While Nouwen certainly had factual evidence to support his case, it is possible to speculate that, at the time, he was still anxious about his paternal relations and felt more at ease when he could make connections with the parental experiences of men he admired. Nouwen also writes at some length about Alice Batchelder – 'the woman he never married but who remained the source of his inspiration all through his life. Boisen himself is aware of the fact that the unreachable love was not only the main cause of his suffering but also the main motive for his creative work' (Nouwen, *Boisen*). This theme certainly emerges in Nouwen's own spiritual writings and was the cause his own subsequent breakdown. We can also see the roots of Nouwen's understanding of human and divine love in his analysis of Boisen's search for the arbutus, a 'mysterious' flower which became the symbol of his highest ideals: 'Discovering the conditions under which arbutus grew is perhaps one of the best

ways of symbolizing Boisen's life work: discovering the ways in which man can overcome the sense of alienation. This was the motive for the exploration of his inner world, this brought him through the wilderness of the lost which he calls "a little known country" and this led him to the final discovery that "love between man and woman can be truly happy only when each is a free and autonomous being, dependent not upon the other, but upon God"' (Nouwen, *Boisen*).

Nouwen's account of meeting Boisen shortly before his death reflects some of the minister's fears and sexual problems: 'The fact that I was a priest intrigued him, especially in relation to celibacy,' Nouwen writes. 'Also, here were very strong personal overtones which suggested many unresolved sexual problems'. This may also have been an issue at the time for Nouwen who reports that Boisen's 'suffering had become a source of creativity' (Nouwen, *Boisen*). The condition in which Nouwen had found him showed that 'his basic suffering never completely left him' A new psychosis had been diagnosed in recent years since when he had lived on the borderline of reality:

> Especially when he became tired, the psychotic contents came more to the surface: his fear of a nuclear war, his many death-thoughts and his never completely solved love affair with Alice. He still idealized her who only wanted to be left alone and he still suffers from his puritanistic fears. But seeing a man so closely and being able to experience how a deep wound can become a source of beauty in which even the weaknesses seem to give light is a reason for thankfulness (Nouwen, *Boisen*).

This note-taking is important in understanding the foundation on which Nouwen's theology of the wounded healer was constructed. In the light of Nouwen's later struggles with a close friendship, it seems almost prophetic. It was at Menninger that Nouwen began to become more acutely aware of his homosexuality. While travelling from Miami to Topeka, he stayed at the Cistercian Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky, in the hope of finding someone with whom he could talk. When the guest master learned that Henri Nouwen had studied psychology, he introduced him to John Eudes Bamberger, a monk and a psychiatrist: 'I think it was the most critical period of his life up until that time. What we talked about is confidential but it related to his whole vocation and that's why it was so disturbing. As far as I am aware he never had the vocational problem with the same anguish as

he did at that time. He came with considerable stress and crisis. I think he left in peace' (Bamberger, 1997).

Nouwen later referred to his meeting with Bamberger in a published journal but did not specify the issue: 'John Eudes listened to me with care and interest, but also with a deep conviction and a clear vision; he gave me much time and attention but did not allow me to waste a minute; he left me fully free to express my feelings and thoughts but did not hesitate to present his own; he offered me space to deliberate about choices and to make decisions but did not withhold his opinion that some choices and decisions were better than others; he let me find my own way but did not hide the map that showed the right direction. In our conversation, John Eudes emerged not only as a listener but also as a guide, not only as a counselor but also as a director. It did not take me long to realise that this was the man I had needed so badly' (Nouwen, 1981: 15). Some people have speculated that the issue concerned the conflict between Nouwen's priesthood and his homosexuality which had come to the fore during his psychological training.[30]

The years 1932-1966, then, constituted a clear, formative phase in Nouwen's early life, especially in terms of family relationships, spiritual and psychological development and sexual awareness. During this period the root causes of Nouwen's anxiety and insecurity as well as his lifelong search for love and intimacy become apparent. The seeds of his spiritual writings flowered from a persistent questioning of his own goodness and self-worth which he could trace back almost to the womb. This uncertainty caused him to doubt the reality of God's unconditional love:

> I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places searching for love! This is the great tragedy of my life and of the lives of so many I meet on the journey ...I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire' (Nouwen, 1994b: 39-40).

[30] The source requested anonymity

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THE WOUNDED HEALER (1966-1975)

The years 1966-1975 saw Nouwen establishing himself in the United States as a teacher of psychology, Catholic preacher and a writer of spirituality. During this time the Dutch priest's vision of life was enlarged and many boundaries collapsed. He once remarked that, during this period, he had discovered that Protestants belonged as much to the Christian church as Roman Catholics, that Hindus and Muslims believed in God as much as Christians, that pagans could love each other as much as religious believers, that 'the human psyche is multidimential, that theology, psychology and sociology are intersecting in many places, that women have a real call to ministry, that homosexual people have a unique vocation in the Christian community ...these discoveries gradually broke down many fences that had given me a safe garden, and made me deeply aware that God's covenant with God's people includes everyone.' It was a time of searching, questioning and agonising. A time that was 'extremely lonely and not without moments of great inner uncertainty and ambiguity. The Jesus that I had come to know in my youth had died' (Nouwen, *My History with God).*

Integration of Psychology and Spirituality

It was during this period that American Christian spirituality changed from being 'dwelling-orientated' to 'seeking-orientated' (LaNoue, 2001: 5). Post-war religious vitality, especially Protestant evangelical revivalism, combined with a growing population and expanding economy, had created a spirituality strongly associated with the home, community and country, while institutional or organised religion had largely determined the way people practised Christianity. Spirituality had been defined, not in terms of seeking an inner path to God but as conforming to set of ecclesiastical rules, a 'natural response to a natural habitation where the sacred was fairly fixed' (LaNoue, 2001: 4).

However, during the 1960s, as American confidence, patriotic idealism and moral traditionalism were increasingly questioned, the churches had faced accusations of moral hypocrisy bigotry, fear and racism. The poor had become disenfranchised

through urbanisation and industrial growth. Pluralism had given rise to violence. The nuclear threat, military action in Vietnam and the murder of public leaders – John F. Kennedy and later Martin Luther King – all conspired to form attitudes which did not trust authority. LaNoue notes that an anti-establishment youth movement inspired young people to turn inward through the occult and eastern religions. Radical theologians said that God was dead. Existentialism looked for meaning in the present moment: 'The role of the church and its clergy began to shift toward social issues, and "therapeutic Christianity" began its development as psychology came ever more into vogue' (La Noue, 2001: 5).

The new climate of a seeking-orientated spirituality was brought about by Americans discovering that God dwelt not only among homeowners but also with sojourners. Experience rather than dogma held sway; psychology was emerging as a scientific discipline which could help people make sense of their experiences. Spirituality in North America was heavily influenced by psychology as Americans sought mental strength through self-fulfilment and self-realisation. Holt thinks the influence was positive because healing is a key component of Christian teaching and psychology tries to heal people's emotional wounds. But it also had negative connotations in that psychology created a self-absorption which could overlook community and social issues (LaNoue, 2001: 6).[31]

Naus believes Nouwen was influential at a time when psychologists of classical behaviourism, experienced in measuring behavioural patterns, tended to be distrustful of what went on 'inside people'. Whereas classical behaviourists treated psychology as a science, Nouwen was phenomenological, focusing on people's experience and the movement of their inner, spiritual lives. The Roman Catholic Church's use of psychology was often pragmatic and compartmentalised. Friends think Nouwen integrated the best wisdom of forward-looking European theologians with clinical-psychological insights from Holland and the Menninger Foundation. Nouwen's theological understanding of 'The Wounded Healer' began to develop

[31] LaNoue draws on the work of Bradley P.Holt, *Thirsty for God, A Brief History of American Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), pp 115-116

while he was a visiting professor of pastoral theology at the University of Notre Dame[32] between 1966-1968:

> He was sensitive to people's sufferings and wanted to do something about that. As he was clearly very wounded himself, the concept of the wounded healer came very naturally to him. Nouwen's spirituality emerged from the psychology to which he had been exposed. The wounded healer is both a profound spiritual concept and a profound psychological concept within a phenomenological, not a behaviourist, tradition. Nouwen found a way of connecting the two. In his pastoral counselling he would lead people from the level of psychology to the level of transcendence. Human experience had to be elucidated by reference to the Gospel but spirituality could not be disembodied from human experience' (Naus, 1997).

Colleagues detected within Nouwen a certain lack of integration and a man ill- at-ease with himself. Don McNeill's recollection of his first encounter with Nouwen - before a concelebration of the Eucharist – points to a man of confusion: 'His hair was all over the place and he was running around making sure the cruets for the wine and the bread were taken care of before the Mass began. I did not know who he was. I even wondered if he was someone who was able to celebrate the Eucharist. But when he began to preach there was an immediate magnetism and all of us were awestruck by his passion and insights' (Don McNeill, 1997).

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[32] The University of Notre Dame, near South Bend, Indiana, was founded in 1842 by the Congregation of the Holy Cross, a French religious community led by Father Edward Sorin who sought to establish 'a great Catholic university of America.' With the development of the largest Catholic printing press in the world, it became the place where the Catholic Church in America was able to plan its strategies on education, culture and parish life, particularly in the light of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). When Nouwen joined the staff, Catholic congregations across North America were starting to open their windows to the unpredictable winds of ecclesiastical change. There was both anticipation and revolt: the Mass was changing from Latin to English, priests at the altar began to face the people, parishes were becoming less cloistered and more socially engaged, and there was a genuine atmosphere of ecumenism among Christian denominations and other faith traditions. Nouwen, who attended sessions of the council in Rome, was enthusiastic about the changes and his subsequent theology is clearly shaped by its vision. The Church was to be seen as a mystery or sacrament, not primarily as an institution. The Church was the whole people of God, not merely the hierarchy, clergy and religious. Its mission included action on behalf of justice and peace, involving the laity in its own apostolate. Moreover, the word 'Church' was to embrace all Christians: God used other Christian churches and non-Christian religions in offering salvation to all, so the Roman Catholic Church was not to the sole means to salvation. Not all official teachings of the Church were equally binding or essential to the integrity of the Catholic faith, while the dignity of the human person and the freedom of the act of faith formed the foundation of religious liberty for all, over against the view that 'error has no rights.'

Nouwen's lectures at Notre Dame provided the foundation for his first book, *Intimacy*, a series of essays in pastoral psychology written from the perspective 'of a priest who wonders how to understand what he sees in the light of God's work with people' (Nouwen, 1969:1). This is the only book where he addresses directly the issue of sexuality in any depth. From the opening pages, it is clear that Nouwen is preoccupied with one question: 'How can I find a creative and fulfilling intimacy in my relationship with God and my fellow human beings?' (Nouwen, 1969: 1). His subsequent questions suggest that intimacy is a central issue in his own life and ministry: 'How can one person develop a fruitful intimacy with another person? What does intimacy mean in the life of a celibate priest or a community of religious?' (Nouwen, 1969: 1). Nouwen develops Erikson's insight that the most crucial psychological task for older adolescents is striking the balance between intimacy and distance in relationships, an issue (Nouwen notes) relevant to other groups, including celibate priests.[33] Although his early writings are not crafted in a personal style, it is fair to assume the weight of attention intimacy receives from his pen indicates an affinity with the subject. It seems reasonable to assume also that, where Nouwen uses the words 'we' and 'us' in his early work, he really means 'I' and 'me' but feels a need to disguise his own personal association. Teaching and writing become vehicles through which he can objectively explore his own inner world.

In a commentary on adolescence, he speaks of dark, inner urges which conflict with authoritarian religious formation, feelings of shame and guilt which 'make us feel solemnly unique but, at the same time, horribly lonesome' (Nouwen, 1969: 14). But the denial and repression of the dark side of a personality are probably more harmful to religious maturation than the ownership of it. Following Jung's theory that self-realisation involves the integration of the shadow, he writes: 'It is the growing ability to allow the dark side of our personality to enter into our awareness and thus prevent a one-sided life in which only that which is presentable to the outside world is

[33] Erik Erikson (1902 - 1994) was a psychoanalyst and psychosocial theorist who studied the interaction of body, psyche, society and culture in the development of persons. He introduced the concept of identity and clarified the function of the ego in its work of synthesis, adaptation and integration of experience and selfhood.

considered as a real part of ourselves. To come to an inner unity, totality and wholeness, every part of our self should be accepted and integrated' (Nouwen, 1969: 15).[34]

Nouwen's considerations of intimacy and sexuality do not concern the circumstances of falling in love with a stranger but question whether such a love could ever be a reality for anyone. For him there seems to be 'a spark of misunderstanding in every intimate encounter, a painful experience of separateness' in attempts to unite, a fearful resistance in acts of surrender:

> We probably have wondered in our many lonesome moments if there is one corner in this competitive, demanding world where it is safe to be relaxed, to expose ourselves to someone else, and to give unconditionally. It might be very small and hidden. But if this corner exists, it calls for a search through the complexities of our human relationships in order to find it (Nouwen, 1969: 23).

Love, for Nouwen, is based on the mutuality of the confession of 'our total self to each other'. (Nouwen, 1969: 29). This involves the sharing of weaknesses and pains as well as successes. A new area of life is entered when the exposure of a person's deepest dependency becomes an invitation to share an existential experience. Characterised by truthfulness and tenderness, love asks for total disarmament, an encounter without weapons. Nouwen says the central question is whether or not human beings can reveal themselves to each other in total vulnerability: 'In love men and women take off all the forms of power, embracing each other in total disarmament. The nakedness of their body is only a symbol of total vulnerability and availability. When the physical encounter of men and women in the intimate act of intercourse is not an expression of their total availability to each other, the creative fellowship of the weak is not yet reached (Nouwen, 1969: 31-32).

[34] Carl G. Jung (1875-1961), Swiss psychotherapist and founder of analytical psychology, who consolidated his study and experience of the unconscious and presented the ultimate nature of life in terms of opposites. He contrasted the persona (the socially- acceptable mask) with the shadow (the rejected counterpart), and the anima (the feminine in man) with the animus (the masculine in woman). The opposites of the psyche are personified, he argued, in dreams and interpreted in counselling to create the process of individuation: recognising and eventually integrating the opposites into the unity called the self, in the psyche's natural drive towards wholeness.

Nouwen's advocacy of weakness as the creating force of autonomy, self-awareness and freedom is evident throughout his pastoral theology and spiritual writings. The mystery of love and the birth of new life are discovered within the state of complete vulnerability, not domination. Power kills. Weakness creates an openness to give and receive in mutuality. Following Merton's theory that love is based on a belief in the reversibility of evil, Nouwen sees love as an act of forgiving in which evil is converted to good and destruction to creation.[35] This leads him to conclude that the sexual act is a religious act:

> Out of the total disarmament of man on his cross, exposing himself in this extreme vulnerability, the new man arises and manifests himself in freedom. Is it not exactly in this same act of self-surrender that we find our highest fulfillment which expresses itself in the new life we create? Religion and sexuality, which in the past have often been so often described as opponents, merge into one and the same reality when they are seen as an expression of the total self-surrender in love (Nouwen, 1969: 33).

Having laid the groundwork for a theology of sexuality, Nouwen explores reasons for depression among seminarians. He points out that a seminarian trying to control strong drives and impulses can find himself in a situation where 'many taboos are questioned and in which he finds many ambiguous signals regarding the expression of his own erotic desires' (Nouwen, 1969: 82). Faculty members, he says, have become fearful of giving warnings against 'particular friendships' (familiar to Nouwen in his own days of priestly formation) whereas

> ... many students find themselves in energy-devouring personal relationships with roommates or friends and are sometimes made very anxious due to the obvious sexual feelings which have come to their awareness. Overt homosexual relations which ten years ago were mostly a part of the fantasy of the staff now at times have become a part of the student's problems (Nouwen, 1969: 82).

In attempting to overcome loneliness, seminarians establish demanding and exhausting friendships which can be 'clinging and immature and based on primitive needs'. Impulsiveness should give way to mature self-awareness and confidence in

[35] Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Trappist contemplative and prolific writer, was one of Nouwen's inspirations in his early teaching career and the subject of one of his first books.

which friendship can develop as a giving and forgiving relationship through which 'lonesomeness' can be understood and accepted. Yet the stresses on students are so intense that they their needs for intimacy and clinging friendships are often inexhaustible.

Reflecting on intimacy and the mental health of priests, Nouwen is eager to restate that human beings cannot exist without being loved – 'to love and to be loved remains our main concern through life' (Nouwen, 1969: 109). Yet, for a priest, obedient to hierarchical regulations, surrounded by clerical colleagues and under pressure from parishioners, there is enclosure but little intimacy. Being friendly to all people, he often has no friends himself. If he is unable to find a personal form of intimacy, his parishioners become his needs, fulfilling his desires rather than theirs:

> The paradox is that he who has been taught to love everyone, in reality finds himself without any friends; that he who trained himself in mental prayer often is not able to be alone with himself. Having opened himself to every outsider, there is no room left for the insider. The walls of the intimate enclosure of his privacy crumble and there is no place left to be with himself. The priest who has given away so much of himself creates an inexhaustible need to be constantly with others in order to feel that he is a whole person (Nouwen, 1969: 119).

Nouwen senses that the priest's understanding of his own selfhood is under threat as he strives to balance his private and public roles, his inner needs and his outer responsibilities: 'This threat causes anxiety. And this hurts. But if the wounds are understood, it might well be a constructive anxiety. Then an honest diagnosis serves a good prognosis' (Nouwen, 1969: 125).

It is possible to discern, then, within Nouwen's first book, questions about identity and intimacy were probably being borne of his own struggles as a celibate Catholic priest. His friends from the period recognised signs of loneliness in him. When, in 1968, Nouwen returned to Holland to work at the Pastoral Institute in Amsterdam and the Catholic Theological Institute in Utrecht, where he taught seminarians, colleagues became quickly attuned to his need for friendship: 'For a while he lived with a community of professors. He expected more from us than we were able to give him. This need of friendship and community caused a restlessness because he was looking for so many people and so many places, driven by this need of real

affection, a factor of unrest in his life. I remember him giving me the manuscript of the *Intimacy* book. I didn't appreciate it enough at that time but I think he had a need to talk on the subject. By giving me the manuscript, he was probably inviting me to talk about it. I don't think intimacy was a casual thing with him' (Ter Steeg, 1997).

At one point Nouwen resigned from his teaching job and lived for a year as a student in a rented room. Being alone, he discovered, did not necessarily lead to inner peace and solitude of heart but could cause resentment and rancour: 'People I had hoped would come and visit me didn't come; friends I expected to invite me remained silent; fellow priests whom I thought would ask me to assist them in their Sunday liturgy or to preach once in a while didn't need me; and my surroundings had pretty well responded as if I were no longer around. The irony was that I always wanted to be alone to work but when I was finally left alone, I couldn't work and started to become morose, angry, sour, hateful, bitter, and complaining. During that year I realized more than ever my vulnerability' (Nouwen, 1981: 68).

During this time he formulated texts on teaching, preaching and pastoral theology, culminating in his second book, *Creative Ministry*, which explored the relationship between professionalism and pastoral theology. It drew largely on case studies from his early years in the priesthood, pointing out that many students and trainees struggled with their own sense of being before being able to minister. Nouwen argues that leaders only become creatively receptive when they face their fundamental human condition of loneliness and share it with others. Suffering and vulnerability underpin pastoral ministry and should be shared. Quoting John 15: 13 – 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' – Nouwen says few ministers are willing to make their weakness a source of creativity. Yet this, he concludes, lies at the heart of ministry: even in his initial years of priesthood, he is convinced that inner suffering is intimately connected with his spirituality: 'For many individuals professional training means power. But for the minister, who takes off his clothes to wash the feet of his friends, is powerless, and his training and formation are meant to enable him to face his own weakness without fear and make it available to others. It is exactly this creative weakness that gives ministry its momentum' (Nouwen, 1991a: 113).

In 1971 Nouwen became associate professor of pastoral psychology at Yale.[36] But he seems to have managed to stipulate his own conditions for the appointment.[37] The following year he published *The Wounded Healer* in which he argues that ministers are called to make their own wounds available as a source of healing: suffering is the starting point of service. An indication of Nouwen's suppressed homosexuality emerges in the first chapter when he describes an encounter with a 26-year-old former seminarian who came to him for help but at the same time offered him a new understanding of his own situation. Nouwen sees in him the painful expression of 'nuclear man' who has lost faith in technological society and feels alienated from the world in which he lives. But it is obvious from the prominence he gives to the meeting and the language he uses that he is attracted by the man's physical appearance:

> His body is fragile; his face, framed in long blond hair, is thin with a city pallor. His eyes are tender and radiate a longing melancholy. His lips are sensual, and his smile evokes an atmosphere of intimacy. When he shakes your hand he breaks through the formal ritual in such a way that you feel his body as really present (Nouwen, 1979a: 3).

Throughout the treatise Nouwen is concerned to unravel the complexities of people's interior lives, describing the minister as 'the articulator of inner events' (Nouwen, 1979a: 37). But it is the subject of ministerial loneliness which receives the most detailed attention, suggesting that Nouwen himself was struggling with 'one of the most painful human wounds' (Nouwen, 1979a: 83). He argues that competition and

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[36] Founded in 1701 and situated at New Haven, Connecticut, Yale is the third oldest university in the United States. It was originally chartered by the state as the Collegiate School but a Puritan leader, Cotton Mather, concerned about the growing intolerance of religious dissent at Harvard, encouraged a wealthy British trader, Elihu Yale, to contribute to the new institution which was renamed in his honour. The initial curriculum focused on classical studies and an unyielding obedience to orthodox Puritanism. Four years after the separation of church and state, the Divinity School was founded in 1822. This was the new era of the professional schools, such as medicine and law. Parish ministers were too busy to train apprentice clergymen so they were sent to Yale. Henri Nouwen and Sister Margaret Farley, who joined the same day, were the school's first Roman Catholic appointments.

[37] Dittes (1997) explains that, although hired as a clinical psychologist who could help seminarians become more aware of their psychological realities and the needs of parishioners, Nouwen had changed his academic emphasis by the time he took up the position, at his insistence, some two years later. He said he wanted to teach spirituality and theological studies. According to Beumer (1997), Nouwen asked for a permanent position within three years and full tenure within five years. He stated that he should not be expected to produce a dissertation, nor should the subject be broached in future. This may be indication of his desire to have as much time as possible to write spiritual books, based on his psychological experience.

rivalry underline the awareness of personal isolation, creating heightened anxiety and an intense search for the experience of unity and community. Such an awareness has led people to raise questions about how love, friendship, brotherhood and sisterhood can free them from isolation and offer a sense of intimacy and belonging.

> We ignore what we already know with a deep-seated, intuitive knowledge – that no love or friendship, no intimate embrace or tender kiss, no community, commune or collective, no man or woman, will ever be able to satisfy our desire to be released from our lonely condition. This truth is so disconcerting that and painful that we are more prone to play games with our fantasies than to face the truth of our existence ... many celibates live with the naïve dream that in the intimacy of marriage their loneliness will be taken away (Nouwen, 1979a: 84-85).

Yet Nouwen discerns a spiritual dimension to loneliness in that it is able to become the means of service to others. Writing at a time when many were becoming disillusioned and bored with institutional religion, he was also aware of a professional isolation which created an urgent desire to give meaning to people's lives. He compares the wound of loneliness to the Grand Canyon – 'a deep incision in the surface of our existence which has become an inexhaustible source of beauty and self-understanding' (Nouwen, 1979a: 84).

Nouwen sees that a deep understanding of his own pain enables him to convert his weakness into strength and to offer his own experiences as a source of healing to people trapped by the confusions of their own misunderstood sufferings. Loneliness is a painful wound easily denied and neglected. 'But once the pain is accepted and understood, a denial is no longer necessary, and ministry can become a healing service' (Nouwen, 1979a: 87). Making one's wounds a source of healing does not call for a sharing of superficial irritations or any form of spiritual exhibitionism but for an ongoing willingness to ' see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men share' (Nouwen, 1979a: 88).

Developing the Judaeo-Christian concept of hospitality, Nouwen describes it as the minister's ability to pay attention to the guest, rather than deal with the parishioner as a client who has aroused curiosity. The minister who has come to terms with his own loneliness will be at home in his own house. Concentration, leading to meditation

and contemplation, is the necessary precondition for true hospitality, creating a space for another to find his own soul and approach the minister on his own terms. Through this situation, community is formed: 'When we have found the anchor places for our lives in our own center, we can be free to let others enter into the space created for them' (Nouwen, 1979a: 91).

Nouwen argues that such ministry is healing because it removes the false illusion that wholeness can be given by one person to another. It does not take away the loneliness of the other person but invites the other to recognise her pain on a level where it can be shared. People should not regard their wounds as sources of despair and bitterness but 'as signs that they have to travel on in obedience to the calling sounds of their own wounds' (Nouwen, 1979a: 92). Nouwen believes people suffer because of what he sees as a false supposition that they should not experience fear, loneliness, confusion or doubt in their lives. But these wounds are central to the human condition, he argues. By deepening other people's wounds to a level where they can be shared, ministry confronts: 'It does not allow people to live with illusions of immortality and wholeness. It keeps reminding others that they are mortal and broken, but also that with the recognition of this condition, liberation starts' (Nouwen, 1979a: 93). The mobilisation of pain in a common search for life can transform expressions of despair into signs of hope. Hospitality becomes community when it creates a unity based on the shared confession of humanity's basic brokenness and on a shared hope in the God of liberation. When loneliness is misunderstood, it can prove destructive; when it is accepted as a gift to be protected and guarded, it becomes an invitation to transformation and new life. I will show in chapter 6 how gay Catholic theologians use similar language when they refer to the wound and gift of homosexuality.

Although *The Wounded Healer* became a classic text in the field of pastoral ministry, it also drew criticism. 'Many people see the Nouwen minister as a weakling and either turn away in disgust, suspect they are being used by the minister, or treat the pastor like a bumbling grandchild. The wounded-healer pastor may become an inward-looking chaplain of the emotions who forgets her or his function as a prophet

of God and servant of those in need.'[38] The title, though, became a catchphrase and was developed by other religious writers around the world.[39]

Issues in Human Sexuality

If spirituality was changing during this period, so too were people's attitudes towards sexuality. In 1959 Jung had recognised a spiritual quality within the homosexuals he had worked with as a therapist (this I discuss in more detail in chapter 7). Meanwhile, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had promised to update the Catholic Church's thinking by absorbing into its theological approaches the findings of social and behavioural sciences. This had resulted in a new expression of human sexuality. But while the Council's documents had referred to the human person in holistic terms and seemed to encourage Catholics to be more positive towards their own sexuality, those who had responded to the invitation suddenly found themselves criticised by the Magisterium. This marked the start of deep divisions between the church's teaching body and congregations on the meaning of human sexuality: Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 spelt out its own moral stance about what should be regarded as 'unnatural' or artificial.

The student revolts in May 1968, a rise in student militancy around the world, anger in the United states over the Vietnam War, the rise of the hippie movement and its maxim 'make love, not war' had contributed to a belief that the old order was crumbling and a new dawn was breaking (Spencer, 1995: 367). The gay liberation movement in the United States had been sparked by the Stonewall riots of 1969. Woundedness was being superseded by beauty: 'the guys there were so beautiful, they've lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago.' (Spencer, 1995:

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[38] John McFarland, *The Minister as Narrator*, The Christian Ministry, January 1987, p.20

[39] For example, Nouwen's thinking was not unlike that of the Anglican monk, H.A.Williams, who suffered from depression but was able to write helpfully about it. Likewise, there was a strong similarity between Nouwen and the British bible translator, writer and pastor, J. B. Phillips, whose own depressions resulted in spiritual difficulties. Like Nouwen, Phillips had a father who expected much of him, creating in him a fear of criticism and a longing for praise. A biography, published after his death, was entitled *The Wounded Healer*, and reads in places like a study of Nouwen: 'His ministry was worldwide. He guided many through the dark places of doubt and loss of faith. While he was doing this for others, he was himself powerfully afflicted by dark thoughts and mental pains. He knew anxiety and depression, from which there was only temporary release' (Vera Phillips and Edwin Robertson, *The Wounded Healer*, London, SPCK, 1984, from the introduction, pp. vii and viii.

368). As Nouwen began his work in America, he became aware that, for many repressed homosexuals, secrecy and fear were gradually being vanquished by rights. Black Power - which Nouwen had witnessed in the civil rights movement - became the model for Gay Power.[40] Kissing, embracing and holding hands on street marches were accompanied by demands for the ending of oppression and discrimination. Nouwen, writing about the need for people to be themselves if they were to form a deep relationship with God and other people, read articles claiming that if gay people were to 'come out' in society they had first to 'come out' to themselves and face their own nature. Once they had found pride in themselves, they could speak to their family, friends and colleagues without feeling shame and humiliation. Spencer says that that up to the 1960s gay men had no other choice but to follow the heterosexual social structure, their only way of opting out was to forgo a partnership and to become a secret pursuer of brief sexual connections with strangers.

> All gay men were acutely conscious that society viewed them as failed men, that they were isolated, and liable at any time to be treated by psychiatry as sick or deviant, or to be punished by public trial and prison sentences. They also were often ostracised and taunted by colleagues and not infrequently physically attacked by gangs of drunken hoodlums. Gay men formulated techniques to defend themselves, the first being secrecy – various complex signals and language came into being...some felt a tacit agreement with society's view of themselves, which led directly to self-hatred, shame and guilt' (Spencer, 1995: 370).

It was from a psychological perspective that Nouwen first wrote about homosexuality for the *National Catholic Reporter* in the late 1960s when the Holy See itself had not made any statements on the subject, even though Vatican II had stated that, among its purposes, was the engagement of the Church with the Modern World. Dialogue was to be seen as a process towards helping one another in the search for truth (Shinnick, 1997: 7-8). The purpose of Nouwen's article – one the first on homosexuality by a Roman Catholic priest – was to formulate a mature and Christian attitude towards a matter which 'attracts and repels us at the same time'. Writing under the guise of the first person plural and in a style which establishes

[40] In 1965 Nouwen had joined the historic civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and reported on Martin Luther King's speech.

objectivity, Nouwen accepts that it not a subject for open debate but there are nonetheless many questions to raise about it. Limiting himself to a discussion of male homosexuality, Nouwen says the remit is not to decide who is right or wrong but to explain the different approaches. The first is that the homosexual is the victim of a scapegoat mechanism: homophobia is akin to anti-Semitism, anti-negroism, even anti-Catholicism. Nouwen asks why people avoid homosexuals instead of trying to understand them: 'Is this, perhaps, because of our own feelings which we don't wish to acknowledge? We want to be a man – masculine, strong – and the idea of a feminine trait in ourselves is threatening. Are we projecting our own homosexual feelings, which we cannot even acknowledge, on the other whom we can hate and reject?' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). Nouwen advises against rejecting such an approach too easily because

> ...biology as well as psychology affirms the basically bisexual nature of man. Every human being has masculine as well as feminine determinants, and in certain times of our life, especially when we are still struggling with finding out who we really are, homosexual feelings can be just as strong as heterosexual ones (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*).

Drawing on the work of Robert Merton, Nouwen considers the sociological mechanism of 'self-fulfilling prophecy', an originally false definition which calls for behaviour making the falsity true. If homosexuals are treated as being different, queer or excluded, it is not surprising, Nouwen argues, that they develop behaviour isolating them from others and forcing them to cluster in small groups like lepers with an incurable disease. Nouwen sees homosexuality as 'a terrible pain' which can be helped. It is the fear, he says, of isolation and queerness which makes people ill. Nouwen also addresses Biblical texts which appear to condemn homosexuality, concluding that neither scripture nor medieval practices can be used to prove that homosexuality is a perversion calling for precise punishment (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*).

Nouwen concentrates on the inner life of the homosexual and the forces which imprison him 'in the chains of loneliness and despair'. This seems of particular concern to him, yet all the while he hides behind the first person plural: 'We would like to quote Freud's answer to give you an idea of his attitude towards

homosexuality ...' Nouwen notes that the psychoanalytic approach to homosexuality, developed by Freud, concludes that it is nothing to be ashamed of but is an arrest in sexual development. In view of what I have written of Nouwen's upbringing and his needs, it is important to stress Nouwen's interest in a 1962 study by Bieber who compared a hundred homosexuals with a hundred non-homosexuals. This is Nouwen's summary of Bieber's conclusions:

> It is not so much the overprotective mother or the cold father who causes homosexuality, but the pathological interaction between the parents, of which the child becomes the victim. If the mother needs her son because she does not receive love and affection from her husband, she might do harm. If the parents cannot communicate with each other, and use the child as a scapegoat for their unresolved conflicts, they might unconsciously strangle his emotional development. If they become engaged in a subtle competition to win the love of their own child, they expect more from him than he can give. Instead of being wanted, he is needed (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*).

Nouwen wonders why all the children of such a family do not show the same problems, a cloaked reference, perhaps, to his siblings. The child 'selected, chosen, so to speak, for this pathological interaction of the parents' is the one who becomes the 'fearful, lonesome' boy who always feels he is an outcast. This child, Nouwen suggests, can become homosexual out of fear and alienation.

For a phenomenological approach to homosexuality, Nouwen considers the work of Giese whose 1958 study of a homosexual man had exemplified the influence of existentialism on modern psychiatry. The behaviour of the homosexual is marked by a growing hostility and distrust towards the world and an increased attention on his own body: 'He rambles through the world, restless, anxious, wanting to be close to everybody but not able to develop real friendships with anyone. Always looking, never finding. Always out there; never in the center. With the first look at a stranger he thinks about the most intimate contact, and in the most intimate contact he feels completely alone.'(Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). Nouwen concludes that adolescence is the time when the world opens itself in sensuality – 'a time through which we all have to go' – but after which people have to close themselves ' and become faithful to what we trust' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). Nouwen was most likely thinking of the priesthood. He sees faithfulness as 'an accomplishment in front of the multiformity of the sensible world' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). The man who chooses a

homosexual way of life, he decides, fixates in the stage of restless rambling, 'a lonesome man without a home' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). It is important to note that restlessness and homecoming are the themes of Nouwen's later writings.

Nouwen criticises a 1959 book by an English priest, Father M. Y. Buckley, which stated that homosexual acts were 'intrinsically evil and at least grave material sins' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). Homosexuality developed as a bad habit, leading to sin, was to be renounced effectively by the will. Such a view, says Nouwen, neither helps people nor shows much understanding of the homosexual problem. The life of the homosexual is 'one great cry for love. In a deficient and failing way he reveals this desire. There are perhaps few people who have to experience their incapacity for real love in such a bitter and painful way' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*).

Nouwen concludes that temporary homosexual feelings are normal and healthy, and that involvement in homosexual acts is not 'fatal' in terms of committing a person to such behaviour for the rest of his life: 'More dangerous than the experience is the anxiety and fear related to it and the avoidance of asking for help and advice' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). Nouwen supports the view that there is hope for the practising homosexual if he lives with a strong desire to change his way of life: 'He can be helped and even cured, although it might be a long and often difficult process which calls for much patience' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*). If homosexuals cannot be cured, Nouwen argues, they can share intellectual and cultural activities which make the sexual act of secondary importance or they can give their life to God, disposing of their sexuality in the form of abstinence through sacrifice. He cautions against forcing a homosexual to change: 'It is much more important to relate to him on the basis of reality, to show understanding and to prevent any form of rejection of him as a human being, who needs love and charity perhaps more than anybody else' (Nouwen, *Homosexuality*).

Some years later Nouwen admits his views have been broadened through discussions with homosexuals who had challenged him on his previous stance. Now he is convinced that a view which proposes that a homosexual change his feelings is 'a direct offense to his most precious self' (Nouwen, *Self-Availability*, p 1). The question for homosexuals is not about how they can become different but how they

can meaningfully relate to their own sexual feelings. The document is one of the most persuasive psycho-spiritual studies on homosexuality ever written. That it has not received wide circulation has been a loss for the Christian Church as well as for many homosexuals.

Nouwen thinks homosexuals fail to relate meaningfully to their sexual feelings because they are already judged and evaluated by society before they can make them their own. This makes it difficult for gay people to come to terms with their behaviour and relate to their feelings realistically. A culture hostile to homosexuality, seeing it as abnormality or pathology, encourages homosexuals to disown themselves from sexual feelings and place them on the periphery of their experience. The idea of being or becoming homosexual is so fear-laden that many gay people are unable to relate realistically to the feelings as their own. Here, Nouwen draws on the work of the Dutch psychiatrist, W.G. Sengers, who showed that the deep-seated resistance against a person's homosexual feelings was one of the main reasons for 'the great suffering of the homosexual' (Nouwen, *Self-Availability*, p. 4). While erotic feelings towards a person of the same sex should be valuable and enriching through an experience of strong attraction and freeing love, in reality they resulted in feelings of shame, low-esteem and the fear of being labelled abnormal. What should be experienced as a positive was perceived as a negative because homosexuals adapted their feelings to what other people said about them. The inevitable setting-in of denial created a strong wall of resistance which burdened homosexuals with psychological problems. The first level of resistance resulted in the homosexual denying his inclination, not only to other people, but primarily to himself. Nouwen thinks this kind of denial does great harm to the personality, creating emotional poverty as it cuts the person off from his most personal, intimate and creative force. The second level of resistance was one where the homosexual knew and understood his feelings but was tortured by the fear that anyone else should know about them; consequently he suffered from much self-imposed isolation because he was never in a position to be himself and express his real feelings. It is most likely that Nouwen was at this stage. He writes:

> In that case the homosexual becomes so preoccupied with the fear of becoming known as a homosexual that his sexual feelings are constantly in

> his mind and become like an isolated power which haunts him day and night and sexualizes his total existence. Every situation becomes filled with dangerous occasions and the homosexual is constantly on his guard to prevent anyone from discovering his condition (Nouwen, *Self-Availability*, p. 6).

Such internalised tension is so great that the sexual life is unable to form a unity with the rest of the personality. Moreover, it becomes a hostile part which through its increasing power becomes a disturbing reality. Nouwen comments here that homosexual feelings, like heterosexual feelings, touch the core of a man's internal life 'and he who pretends not to have them is like a man who pretends to be able to live without a heart' (Nouwen, *Self-Availability*, p.7). A man who can make his homosexual feelings available to himself and recognise that they belong at the core of his life will be someone who can relate to them on a realistic basis. Nouwen argues that Christian morality does not in any sense advocate the denial of feelings, merely a responsible way of relating to them. He says man becomes moral only when he is able to face his own real condition and make his decisions from like. This is very similar to Nouwen's basic understanding of 'The Wounded Healer.' Feelings in themselves are neither moral nor immoral:

> If a man feels a strong erotic love for another man, he experiences a real deep human feeling which tells him very much about himself. If he thinks, talks, or acts as if this feeling is not there at all, he mutilates his own emotional life and is in danger of psychological paralysis. But when he makes his real feelings available to himself and recognizes them as his own, he is able to make a moral decision about the way of life he wants to live (Nouwen, *Self-Availability*, p.8).

There may be more than one correct moral choice. It is possible, Nouwen argues, for two men to develop a deep personal relationship based on a strong mutual attraction or for homosexuals to invest their emotions in social concerns. The feelings might become part of a more profound spiritual and contemplative life and it might be possible to detect within them, observes Nouwen, a call to celibacy and the opportunity for a larger range of personal friendships. When sexual feelings are released from their isolation and integrated into the total personality, they lose their dark power and energy which can lead people into promiscuity, loneliness, of a life dominated by the manipulation of others. Nouwen concludes that the Gospel makes it 'overwhelmingly clear' that Christ came to reveal man's real condition and to challenge him to face it without fear:

> Christ invited man to take off the mask of his illusion of self-righteousness. He in no way judges feelings or emotions. He only asks us not to deny, distort, or prevent them, but to make them available for God's love. For the homosexual this perhaps is more difficult than for others, but if he can claim his feelings as being his own and liberate himself from the fear of prejudices, taboos, and rejections, he may be a living witness of the necessity to overcome the artificial barriers that separate man from his fellowman (Nouwen, *Self-Availability,* pp. 9-10).

In 1973 – the year the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a pathology from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - Nouwen distributed the article to students including Chris Glaser who found it 'incredibly enlightened' for the period. Glaser, who was Yale University's first openly gay student, discovered Nouwen to be the most supportive of all professors, especially in terms of understanding homosexuality: 'His availability to me was part of a broader context of support for a lot of people. In addition, he had a particular concern for those who were marginalised. He had a strong sense of vocation as a celibate priest and he would sometimes talk with me about that when I had had a bad relationship. While he did not expect gay people to be celibate, he believed they should be in a covenant relationship. This was very different from the Church's position. Nouwen was an independent thinker but chastity, obedience and poverty were central to the way he lived his life' (Glaser 1997).

During these years, articles on homosexuality were appearing in a number of Catholic publications, many of them written by John McNeill.[41] For example, in 1970, McNeill published a series of three articles on *The Christian Male Homosexual* in the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review.* These articles, based on years of counselling experience and scholarly research, proposed changes in the pastoral approach towards gay people, designed to 'correct social injustices and indignities suffered by homosexuals and stressing that they too are children of Christ's redeeming love' (McNeill, 1993: 3). McNeill says hundreds of priests and religious responded, urging

[41] John McNeill, a Catholic priest and practising psychotherapist, was subsequently expelled from the Society of Jesus (1987) for refusing to cease his ministry to gay men and lesbians. McNeill laments past conspiracies of silence within the church on the issue of homosexuality and, ironically, draws attention to the fact that it is the Dutch catechism which remarks in 'that silence and the absence of any open discussion which allowed prejudice and unfounded fears to flourish, often leading to serious persecutions and injustices.' (McNeill, 1976: 2).

him to do further research. In 1976, he published *The Church and the Homosexual* which argued that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality.

Nouwen's most successful book of this period, *Reaching Out,* found particular resonance in the homosexual community, even though homosexuality itself was never mentioned. It is a book about the quest for an authentic Christian spirituality 'born out of struggles which in the first place were and still are my own' (Nouwen, 1980: 16). He says he was hesitant to write the book because of its personal background but feels his story must be shared because ' what is experienced as most unique often proves to be most solidly embedded in the common condition of being human' (Nouwen, 1980: 16). There is an honesty about this study of existential loneliness as it is filtered through the prism of Nouwen's own psychological and spiritual experience but, while the text is anecdotal, it reveals little in the way of biographical understanding – 'organised self-disclosure' (Higgins, 1997). Through his desire to write in a utilitarian fashion with apparent openness, he obscures the nature of his own struggles with generalisations. This again demonstrates the fear he felt about his own homosexuality. That he could use his struggles as the basis for a controlled exploration of spirituality for a wide audience would not have seemed dishonest to him. However, the theme of the book - reaching out to the inner self, to human beings and to God – begged a greater openness in view of his urging of homosexuals to become available to their innermost feelings.

The spiritual life, argues Nouwen, is a constantly flowing movement between polarities: between the poles of loneliness and solitude (the relationship to oneself); hostility and hospitality (the relationship to others); and between illusion and prayer (the relationship with God). 'The more we come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostilities and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life' (Nouwen, 1980: 19). Nouwen believes 'suffocating loneliness' can be turned into 'receptive solitude' if it is faced and not avoided: 'Does not all creativity ask for a certain encounter with our loneliness, and does not the fear of this encounter severely limit our possible self-expression?' (Nouwen, 1980: 29) Such creativity is stunted by unsatisfied cravings. Lonely people burden others with their divine expectations: 'Friendship and love cannot develop in the form of an anxious clinging to each other …As long as our loneliness brings us

together with the hope that together we no longer will be alone, we castigate each other with our unfulfilled and unrealistic desires for oneness, inner tranquillity and the uninterrupted experience of communion' (Nouwen, 1980: 31). Yet Nouwen seems at pains to warn lonely people against revealing too much about themselves to others in their search for intimacy. He might have been partly reflecting on his own homosexual suppression when he writes:

> ... real openness to each other also means a real closeness, because only he who can hold a secret can safely share his knowledge. When we do not protect with great care our own inner mystery, we will never be able to form community. It is this inner mystery that attracts us to each other and allows us to establish friendship and develop lasting relationships of love (Nouwen, 1980: 32).

Loneliness becomes creative when personal cravings and restless anxieties are replaced by attentiveness and solitude of heart, an inner quality or attitude independent of physical isolation. It is here, Nouwen says, that intimacy and community can become creative, leading to a compassionate solidarity with others:

> Without the solitude of heart, our relationships with others easily become needy and greedy, sticky and clinging, dependent and sentimental, exploitative and parasitic, because without the solitude of heart we cannot experience the others as different from ourselves but only as people who can be used for the fulfilment of our own, often, hidden needs' (Nouwen, 1980: 44).

It is apparent, then, that these words come from a priest struggling with issues of intimacy as they affect his life as a celibate who enjoys being in the company of others. He sees friendship as a 'most precious' gift of life, acknowledging, however, that physical proximity can be as much in the way, as well as the way, of its full realisation. Sometimes he feels closer to friends in their absence. When they are gone, he has a strong desire to meet them again but is then disappointed when they next meet: 'Our physical presence to each other prevented us from a full encounter. As if we sensed that we were more for each other than we could express. As if our individual concrete characters started functioning as a wall behind which we kept our deepest personal selves hidden. The distance created by a temporary absence helped me to see beyond their characters and revealed to me their greatness and beauty as persons which formed the basis of our love' (Nouwen, 1980: 46-47)

Throughout the book, Nouwen's own sense of loneliness is characterised by an ongoing search for intimacy with God and with others. Is intimacy with God possible? he asks. Can people develop a loving relationship with God who transcends human understanding? Prayer leads people into greater suffering because it is an expression of love for a suffering God. Entering into God's intimacy is an entering into the intimacy where all human suffering is embraced in divine compassion. But prayer also needs the constant support and protection of a community to grow and flower. The community of faith, he observes, offers protective boundaries within which 'we can listen to our deepest longings, not to indulge in morbid introspection, but to find our God to whom they point' (Nouwen, 1980: 139-140). Moreover, Nouwen notes, that, in the community of faith

> we can listen to our feelings of loneliness, to our desires for an embrace or a kiss, to our sexual urges, to our cravings for sympathy, compassion or just a good word; also to our search for insight and to our hope for companionship and friendship. In the community of faith we can listen to all these longings and find the courage, not to avoid them or cover them up, but to confront them in order to discern God's presence in their midst. There we can affirm each other in our waiting and also in the realization that in the centre of our waiting the first intimacy with God is found (Nouwen, 1980: 140).

Higgins believes Nouwen's style was powerful 'because he was exploring so much in himself.' His genius lay in his remarkable ability to communicate at a level of transpersonal intimacy which many spiritual writers failed to achieve comfortably (Higgins, 1997). Callahan argues that Nouwen's success was located in his ability to 'contemplate his experience in faith on paper, then share the fruits of his contemplation in print. He told us about himself from the guts out and people could identify with that he was saying' (Callahan 1997). Nouwen's spirituality of loneliness made particular connections with readers who were also homosexual priests. Evidence is given by Shackerley who first read *Reaching Out* while struggling with sexuality, depressions and a church vocation. It enabled him to begin a series of paradigm shifts in his spiritual life:

> I find my life in a constant state of movement and change, desiring intimacy yet fearing it, desiring aloneness, yet companionship, experiencing periods of depression and anxiety. I continue to read this book in search of discovering some sense of meaning. I am a person who is often struck with depression, has had to struggle with the church's views of homosexuality and has a strong

> desire to be still and alone with God. Nouwen's writing resonated with profound reality and integrity – a man who articulated my personal struggles with clarity, gentleness and empathy. He reminded me I could not bypass the polarities of self which tear away at me so negatively at times: the pole between being internally depressed while presenting myself as the competent minister; the pole between being the expected heterosexual, while suppressing the real homosexual me if I was to fulfil a vocation to the priesthood; the pole between being a shy and private man, yet a public and therefore expected-to-be hospitable figure, now a possession of others Shackerley, 1998).[42]

In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen comments that, in the Gospels, Jesus twice invited his closest friends, Peter, John and James, to share his most intimate prayer: once on the top of Mount Tabor where they saw his face shining like the sun and his clothes white as light (Matthew 17: 12) and later in the Garden of Gethsemane where they witnessed his face in anguish and his sweat falling to the ground like great drops of blood (Luke 22: 44). The prayer of the heart brings pilgrims both to Tabor and to Gethsemane: 'When we have seen God in his glory we will also see him in his misery, and when we have felt the ugliness of his humiliation we also will experience the beauty of his transfiguration' (Nouwen, 1980: 138). Shackerley remarks that these interpretations brought theological form to his struggles with depression and sexuality: 'For me, these garden experiences were to become transformed and offered as gifts to the church. Theology, experience and prayer became a whole, and not a disjointed dualism. What Nouwen taught me was to love these but most of all to be patient and wait. The bouts of depression and the struggles with sexuality became guests and not strangers in my most innermost life. The patience was worked out in another gift, the gift of aloneness and solitude which I have learned to accept and enjoy. Nouwen taught me that I did not have to live in frenzied activity but simply to listen, not run. This is so important now as a priest. I'm fulfilled in the vocation to which God and his church called me, a vocation found by waiting and solitude. Nouwen's book resonates for me as a person who experiences depression, as a person who is gay and as a priest' (Shackerley, 1998).

[42] The Reverend Paul Shackerley is an Anglican priest working in southern Britain. He submitted his comments especially for this thesis.

Glaser confirms Nouwen's writings resonate clearly with the psychological experiences of many gay and lesbian people. He notes that Nouwen's hunger for a relationship is characteristic of a gay person's struggle for love: 'Gay people and marginalised people share with Nouwen that feeling of woundedness, that feeling of vulnerability, that feeling of hurt, of having to live a hidden life. They share with him the difficulties of securing relationships, that feeling of longing and also of reaching out to God. Many feel they have been denied access to God by traditional religion and so they would relate to that thirst, that hunger for God, which is found in Nouwen's work' (Glaser, 1997).

The nature of Nouwen's sexuality was clear to Glaser even though Nouwen approached such issues circumspectly: 'He had a very strong affection for me and it transcended friendship. I really felt a great love from him. They were very strong feelings of personal attraction that I felt on more than one occasion and we talked about it a little. But it wasn't me specifically. It was generic. He was very curious about the male body and interested in that. It was a general kind of attraction' (Glaser, 1997). Nouwen was always indirect in how he talked about it and how it might apply to himself. It was partly denial and partly fear that, if he were to say something, it could be used against him. He was worried about being exploited, even by his friends: 'To be true to his spirit, he wanted to be who he was in all circumstances, just as he had written about honesty in *The Self -Availability of the Homosexual*, yet he didn't want such openness to interfere with his vocation as a priest which was his higher calling. He would talk about what he considered to be the worst parts of himself, yet he would not reveal something that was so central to him - his sexuality (Glaser, 1997).

Glaser argues that the spiritual drive and the sexual drive derive from the same source. Eros, he claims, has been misinterpreted as a sexual drive when it also forms the basis of the spiritual drive. He defines it as 'that which impassions us towards union' (Glaser 1997). When the drive is sexually addressed, it relates to another body; when it is spiritually expressed, it forms a relationship with God or the communion of saints, or with a religious community. 'Eros very much characterised Nouwen. He was driven by his passion for communion and he felt called by his vocation not to express that sexually but to direct that spiritually. His writings about

Jesus are lover's conversation with Jesus: desire for union with another human being is channelled into his relationship with Jesus or with God' (Glaser, 1997).[43]

Nouwen had some reservations about 'gay spirituality' emerging in America at the time and was aware of writings by John McNeill.[44] This spirituality stated that the body and sexuality were to be enjoyed as pleasurable manifestations of the sacred (Boisvert, 2000: 16). This view rejected traditional Catholic teaching on homosexuality and natural law, which believes that an openness to procreation is a *conditio sine qua non* of sexual union and, ultimately of human love. A distinctively gay contribution to human spirituality described relations with the godhead in erotic language. Boisvert says that while the erotic might be seen as a defining feature of same-sex relationships, it also provides a meaningful opportunity to encounter the sacred because it is characterised by freedom and vulnerability. 'These qualities should also inform and define the human rapport to the divine. To see the godhead as lover – as a source of pleasure – is to enter into a privileged moment with another person, albeit divine, where one stands exposed and naked, ready to be transformed (Boisvert, 2000: 17). Such thinking, which so blatantly undermined church teaching, would have made Nouwen anxious about aligning himself with the homosexual lobby.

Nouwen sublimated his sexual energies into writing and teaching Christian spirituality which, paradoxically and unintentionally, took on the resonance of influential gay spiritual teachers. Harry Hay, for example, believed gay people had a vocation which was central to the development of a spiritual vision of modern gay

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[43] Glaser discloses that, after Nouwen referred to Glaser's book, *Uncommon Calling*, in his own book, *The Road to Daybreak*, Nouwen was approached by the Vatican who asked to see a copy of Glaser's book. When Nouwen informed them that it took the opposite position of Roman Catholic teaching, officials told him not to send it (Glaser, 1997).

[44] McNeill met Nouwen only once. He reveals that, after the publication of his book, *The Church and the Homosexual*, Nouwen invited him to Yale Divinity School to speak to 100 students and attend a reception in his apartment. McNeill comments: 'At the time I observed a real tension and reservation about my message. He never spoke to me personally and I left uncertain if he approved or disapproved of my message' (McNeill, 2001). Nouwen's paradoxical behaviour is apparent here. He would have known of McNeill's position which is why he invited him to Yale. Yet it seems strange that, even after hosting a reception for McNeill in his own apartment, Nouwen failed even to speak with him. This behavioural pattern manifested itself throughout Nouwen's life and might be an indication of his dual sense of attraction and fear to such issues as sexuality and intimacy.

experience.[45] His perception of the calling of gay people was reflected in the existential questions 'Who are we?' 'Where have we come from?' 'What are we here for?' (Boisvert, 2000: 20). These were the very questions Nouwen posed in all his books. LaNoue gives each of them chapter headings in her analysis of Nouwen's spirituality, listing them as 'To Whom Do I Belong?' 'Who Am I?' 'What Is My Purpose?' (LaNoue, 2001: v). LaNoue points out that 'Who am I?' was a characteristic question within American spirituality by the 1960s. Nouwen's response was that human beings were 'the beloved sons and daughters of God' (LaNoue, 2001: 93). LaNoue says that, through his own spiritual journey and a struggle with his own self-identity, Nouwen discovered that 'a person's relationship with self, or his self-image, had to be based on the love of God and the value that such love renders' (LaNoue, 2001: 93).[46]

It is now known that Nouwen was struggling with his homosexuality throughout his life and that his books explored issues which were both deeply personal and universal. But because of his own fears and confusion, it is fair to assume that the questions of self-identity, with which he wrestled as a priest, were often projected on to the written page in a language which de-contextualised them from their original source of anxiety. As a result, Nouwen was able to write in an increasingly personal style about loneliness and alienation which connected powerfully with his readers' struggles. But by failing to make his deepest feelings available to himself, as he had advocated in the article of homosexuality, his own sexuality seems to have become divorced from his spirituality. This resulted in books which theologised the existential questions but disguised the truth from which they were arising. Because Nouwen appears to have kept his homosexuality secret at this time, it is difficult to prove this separation. Nonetheless, friends from this period of Nouwen's career testify that Nouwen's sense of self was becoming increasingly confused. Parker Palmer described how Nouwen came home one evening in a troubled frame of mind:

[45] Harry Hay, who was born in 1912, was the founding father of the modern gay movement. His open stand against homophobia, in society and within gay people themselves, led to the formation of the Mattachine Society in 1950, the United States' first ongoing gay political organisation.

[46] In Nouwen's writings and tapes, he frequently addresses these questions as part of his spirituality of Christian identity.

> He said he could not talk but asked me to hold him. He clung to me fiercely and I hugged him tight in return. After several minutes, his grip relaxed and he explained that in the middle a charismatic talk in front of two thousand people he had suddenly had the feeling that his body was exploding into a million atoms and merging with the audience. He felt his sense of self and his body were disappearing. He said it had been one of the most terrifying experiences of his life (Palmer, 1998).

Dittes believes Nouwen laid himself open to accusations of being a social manipulator, his ego compelling him towards an arbitrary independence. He cites a farewell party for a chaplain when guests had been invited to present their gifts informally before the meal: 'I had noticed that Nouwen did not appear to have a gift with him. Then, during the formal part of the evening, Nouwen stood up, began making his speech and presented his gift then. That seemed to be vintage Henri Nouwen. He would find his way of doing things in a prominent, public and manipulative way, rather than going along with what had been suggested. I think he was totally unaware that he was behaving inappropriately and he would have been chagrined if anyone had pointed this out. There was a dimension of insensitivity to the world here and now which might have been the cost of being terribly sensitive to the more transcendent dimensions' (Dittes, 1997).

During this period, then, Nouwen was establishing his reputation as a dynamic teacher and popular spiritual writer. But it is amply clear from the implicit tone of his books and the explicit analysis in some of his articles that homosexuality was an issue which concerned him, at least from a distance. The fact that Nouwen was making an impact in America at the same time as he was suffering psychologically is shown through anecdotal evidence. The development of gay rights in the United States would have been a constant reminder to him of the question of sexual freedom. There is no evidence that Nouwen discussed his sexuality with friends at this time, except perhaps in confidential counselling sessions and the confessional. However, the fact that his writings during this period subsequently found resonance among homosexuals, especially gay priests, suggest that the psycho-spiritual difficulties Nouwen chose to focus on in his bestselling paperbacks were discernible as key issues affecting gay people. This is certainly not to suggest that heterosexual people were unable to connect with his spirituality. Sales testify to this alone. Nouwen deliberately wrote in a non-exclusive style. But what is significant is that

the emotional life he writes about is particularly identifiable as gay emotional life: emotions and longings which gay people experience intensely because of their deep-seated fears of rejection.

3

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY (1971-1984)

Monastic Spirituality

In June 1974 Nouwen left Yale to spend seven months in a Trappist Monastery, the Abbey of the Genesee, near Rochester in upstate New York. He felt his vocation to be a witness to God's love had become too exhausting and career-orientated. He sensed he might be 'slowly becoming a prisoner of people's expectations instead of a man liberated by divine promises' (Nouwen, 1981: 13). The abbot, John Eudes Bamberger, was a trained psychiatrist.[47]

Nouwen may have chosen the Genesee because of the psychological and spiritual support he might receive from Bamberger who had counselled him some years before. Bamber observed that Nouwen was a man who was hurt by 'all kinds of small things'. Part of his suffering was generated by an over-sensitivity to insignificant forms of rejection: 'If you are the son of the queen's economic adviser you are probably going to have a very high demand for performance on you – it would make you sensitive, fruitful and perceptive. Nouwen's father and his brothers were all high performers and I suspect that anybody in that situation was going to be under a lot of pressure very easily. His mother was his biggest support' (Bamberger, 1997).

Nouwen's sensitivity to aspects of personal relationships was complemented by his commitment to spiritual values. In order to survive psychologically, however, he had to integrate both. It was a dialectical process. Nouwen achieved this with an intensity of feeling and an ability of expression that was limited to relatively few people, argues Bamberger, but not with the same depth of spiritual experience and intellectual breadth as Merton. Specialists in pastoral ministry and spirituality were increasingly adopting psychology. The psychological and social-psychological was having much impact on ministry and spirituality in the United States:

[47] Bamberger had been taught by Merton who was also his spiritual director.

> Nouwen came to the monastery for integration at a time when the spiritual dimension of his psychological life was becoming more urgent for him as he continued with his priesthood. He was a dedicated priest who sought both to be honest and faithful to the Gospel and to respond to people's needs and circumstances which had become sources of much anguish for him. His own struggles in being less involved in his own emotional reactions to situations and people were his chief source of suffering. He reacted very intensely and deeply and not always with the poise that everybody needs to function on a professional level. That he was in touch with that fact and took responsibility for it was his saving grace (Bamberger 1997).

Nouwen's account of his monastic sabbatical, *The Genesee Diary*, marked a turning point in Nouwen's style as a spiritual writer. For the first time in print, he shared his small-mindedness, moods, anger and resentment, acknowledging a need for total affection, an unconditional love and ultimate satisfaction: 'I keep hoping for a moment of full acceptance, a hope that I attach to very little events. Even something rather insignificant becomes an occasion for this full and total event, and a small rejection then easily leads to a devastating despair and a feeling of total failure. John Eudes made it very clear how vulnerable I am with such a need because practically nobody can offer me what I am looking for. Even if someone did offer me this unconditional, total, all-embracing love, I would not be able to accept it since it would force me into an infantile dependency which I, as an adult, cannot tolerate' (Nouwen, 1981: 52).

It is clear from Nouwen's entries that self- identity remains at the heart of his struggles. The sabbatical confirms his vocation to be a priest and a teacher of Christian spirituality in the ascetical, mystical tradition. But he feels he has allowed his persona to be shaped by other people's expectations of him. The compulsion to create roles for himself and please as many people as possible might, to his way of thinking, have impressed his family. But such hyperactivity has diverted him from his own inner truth. He is particularly troubled by his passive aggressive behaviour: anger at not being able to respond as he feels he ought; anger at not knowing how to express disagreement; and anger over 'external obedience while remaining rebellious from within' (Nouwen, 1981: 44). Bamberger notes the 'ought modality' is closely connected with his identity struggle: 'As long as I am constantly concerned about what I "ought" to say, think, do, or feel, I am still the victim of my surroundings and am not liberated. I am compelled to act in certain ways to live up to my self-created

image. But when I can accept my identity from God and allow him to be the center of my life, I am liberated from my compulsion and can move without restraints' (Nouwen, 1981: 203).

Bamberger told Nouwen that he would keep seeking gratification from other people for as long as he had doubts about his self-worth. But by detaching himself from the need for human affirmation and discovering his security in God he would find his true self; then the mental pain of the apparent rejections would not affect him so directly. Conviction of self-worth came through meditation: 'By meditation you can create distance, and what you can keep at a distance, you can shake off' (Nouwen, 1981: 181). In his journal, Nouwen openly admits that he relates to people by manipulation and projection: 'Just as I can behave in my contacts with people in such a way as to provoke an affirmative response, so I can relate to the Lord on my own terms, thereby trying to make him like me. But then I am still more concerned with myself than with the Lord. Slowly I have to learn to meditate not on my own terms but on his. Maybe I don't even know at all who the Lord is; maybe I have never allowed him to enter into my center and give me my real self, my identity' (Nouwen, 1981: 181).

Nouwen's self-analysis bears similarity to studies on narcissism and egocentricity in homosexual men. It suggests that, as Nouwen moved deeper into his prayer life, the more he was able to confront the truth about his sexual identity. Alexander and Nunno argue that the attainment of a positive self-image, confident feelings about a one's identity and sexuality – and the self-assurance that one is not inherently scarred because one is gay - constitute a lifelong struggle rooted in society, family and religion. Drawing on the work of Masterson, they argue that homosexuals with a false sense of self try to avoid painful feelings at the expense of living realistically.[48] If the false self is allowed to dominate and control a gay life, it will result in a severe lack of esteem: 'The false self has a highly skilled defensive radar whose purpose is to avoid feelings of rejection although sacrificing the need for intimacy' (Alexander, 1996: 2). Narcissism is one of the key manifestations of the false self and it is

[48] J. F. Masterson, *The Search for the Real Self*, New York: Free Press (1988). Christopher J. Alexander is a clinical psychologist. Vincent Nunno is a psychologist and marriage counsellor.

possible to detect it in Nouwen's writings. Homosexuals, like him, experience shame, guilt and depression but mask the feelings to others, often exaggerating the opposite feelings in interpersonal relationships. The narcissist, these psychologists suggest, buries his true self-expression as a response to injuries early in life and substitutes this with a compensatory self which is nonetheless highly developed. Masterson, they note, sees narcissism as an inflated false self. The person appears to have everything in terms of wealth, power and talents with a strong sense of knowing what they desire and how to get it (as Nouwen did). But the narcissistic person keeps up the pretence of the defensive self in order to protect himself from the deep-rooted rage and depression associated with an inadequate and fragmented sense of self (Alexander, 1996: 3). The researchers conclude that gay male personality structure is complex. Their study points to the fact that homosexuals may go through a process of introspection and self-awareness, which may contain a narcissistic component. But narcissistic vulnerability and periodic reliance on narcissistic defence mechanisms do not make their behaviour pathological (Alexander, 1996: 12).

Nouwen's period of monastic living certainly forced him to examine his own behavioural patterns and led him to question his deeper identity. In his subsequent years at Yale, Nouwen discovered that the experience of monasticism had been transformational in that it had stripped away his preoccupations with immediate personal concerns and anxieties, and exposed a lack of perspective with larger issues. He had been rarely criticised or praised by the community and therefore did not have to fight for continuing acceptance. A growing intimacy with God had created a widening space for others in prayer. He learned that he was 'loved on a level deeper than that of successes and failures' and as a result was able to 'come into a much deeper contact with myself and with God. God is the hub of the wheel of life. The closer we come to God the closer we come to each other. The basis of community is not primarily our ideas, feelings, and emotions about each other but our common search for God' (Nouwen, 1981: 212). Moreover, as his stay at the monastery brought him closer to Christ, so, too, did it bring him closer to the world. He notes that 'distance from the world has made me feel more compassionate towards it' (Nouwen, 1981: 212).

The Influence of van Gogh

Nouwen returned to Yale and developed a new theological understanding of compassion. It was formed chiefly by his study of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh and the Dutch artist's letters to his brother, Theo, around which Nouwen devised courses in spirituality. By reading the letters and contemplating the pictures, Nouwen argued, three aspects of compassion could be detected: solidarity, consolation and comfort. Compassionate people console by 'feeling deeply the wounds of life, and they offer comfort by pointing beyond the human pains to glimpses of strength and hope' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p.195). In the monastery Nouwen had confessed: 'I have always had a strange desire to be different than other people ... to say, write or do something "different" or "special" that would be noticed and talked about' (Nouwen, 1976: 65). Chastened by his sabbatical, Nouwen sees the compassionate person as one 'whose self-definition is based not on being different, but on being the same' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 196). The words 'compassion' and 'sympathy' both mean 'to suffer with'. Compassionate people are essentially those who are willing to recognise that their identity is anchored in the common experience of being part of the suffering human condition and desire to participate in it as fully and deeply as possible. It is here that van Gogh's genius is rooted, Nouwen observes. He spent his youth struggling to become a painter or a minister yet in both vocations strove to come close to the poor, oppressed and downtrodden. After many setbacks and disappointments, van Gogh came to realise that he should be a painter and not a minister. Nouwen notes that while his career changed dramatically, his vocation remained the same. Nouwen quotes one of van Gogh's letters to his brother:

> I want to do drawings which *touch* some people... I want to progress so far that people will say of my work: he feels deeply, he feels tenderly ... What am I in most people's eyes? A nonentity, or an eccentric and disagreeable man, somebody who has no position in society and never will have, in short, the lowest of the low. Very well ... then I should want my work to show what is in the heart of such a nobody. This is my ambition, which is, in spite of everything, founded less on anger than on love (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 196).

Nouwen was also inspired by van Gogh's understanding of gratitude which had caused him to 'want to leave some souvenir in the shape of drawings or pictures – not made to please a certain taste in art, but to express a sincere human feeling'

(Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 196). This was van Gogh's desire both as an evangelist and as a painter. Compassion, argues Nouwen, essentially means solidarity and here there is no difference between the minister and the artist: 'Both want to touch people and both feel the pain of the distance that often is so hard to bridge' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 197).

Solidarity grown mature by patient waiting is, then, the first step of compassion. The second is consolation, the deepening of pain to a level where it can be shared – *cum solo* with the lonely other. Van Gogh, continuously struggling to reach the depth of the human spirit through his paintings, tries to go beyond human fears and anxieties to touch in his art the deep human sorrow which unites all humanity. Van Gogh writes to Theo: 'I feel that my work lies in the heart of the people, that I must keep close to the ground, that I must grasp life at its deepest, and make progress through many cares and troubles' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 198). Nouwen relates to the fact that van Gogh considered joy and sorrow to be mysteriously linked. His consoling task was to express the joy of living and the pain of dying, he says. Commenting on two drawings, one of the beach at Scheveningen and one of a wood near The Hague, van Gogh had written, 'You see how the sketch of the beach there is a blond, tender effect, and in the wood there is a more gloomy, serious tone. I am glad both exist in life'. (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p.198). Consolation demanded a sincere struggle to reach the centre of human brokenness.

Comfort is the third aspect of compassion which, Nouwen notes, means 'strength together.' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p.198). Van Gogh demonstrated this quality because he was more a contemplative who wanted to understand the nature of things than an activist who wanted to influence people. He comforts, argues Nouwen, by discovering for himself the inner beauty of people and their world and by drawing out of the dirtiest corners of life rays of light from the same sun. In a letter, van Gogh wrote that 'there is something noble, something that cannot be destined for the worms … it is simply a fact that the poorest little woodcutter or peasant on the heath or miner can have emotions and inspiration which give him a feeling of an eternal home to which he is near…' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p.199).

Compassion, Nouwen contends, challenges people to manifest solidarity by crying out with those who suffer, to console by facing together 'the dreadful abyss of existence' and to comfort by revealing the 'first rays of light as reflections of the great sun that nurtures us all' (Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 200). Nouwen cites van Gogh as one of his greatest influences, an inspiration even more because of the episodic attacks of mental anguish he suffered, leading to an asylum admission. During this time, he notes, van Gogh painted some of his most remarkable canvases: years later, Nouwen would write some of his best books after being treated for a breakdown.

Carol Berry, who attended Nouwen's van Gogh classes, recalls that they were not so much presented as lectures but as 'opportunities to gain insights into our own selves, our own struggles ... Nouwen, with his Dutch accent and his own yearning for deeper purpose and closeness to God, somehow began to take on the character of van Gogh. His teaching connected with our deep emotional and spiritual selves. It was Nouwen's own struggles and his openness to the struggles of others which led him to understand van Gogh and to reveal van Gogh's compassionate being to us' (Carol Berry, 1998).

An insight into Nouwen's own compassionate ministry as a pastor is given by Louis Dupré, former professor in the philosophy of religion at Yale, who sought Nouwen's guidance during a depression. 'He observed none of the rules of Freudian analysis and there was no question of therapy. He was able to speak to modern people with such modern problems as anxiety and disruption. This was his real power. What was important was the spiritual texture of his life. But to him the spiritual had no halo around it. It was no form of deification' (Dupré, 1997).

Dupré says Nouwen avoided being classified in any particular school of thought. His spirituality grew out of his own development as a priest and clinical psychologist who felt psychological language had to become spiritual language: 'He was a man of tension yet there was also an enormous sense of liberation about him. He was spiritual in the sense his whole life was penetrated with the *unum necessarium*. It was either this way of life - or he would have gone down completely. He could only

overcome the tensions and problems in his own life by becoming totally spiritual' (Dupré, 1997).

Conflicts of the Soul

In 1976, two conflicting Catholic perceptions on homosexuality were published. In its 'Declaration on Homosexuality' – the Vatican's first major statement opposing gay and lesbian relationships - the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) reiterated traditional Catholic teaching on sexual morality, stating that every genital act should be within the framework of marriage and that 'immutable principles' arising from the essential order of [man's] nature ... 'transcend historical contingency' (quoted in Dillon, 1999: 56). The Vatican rejected arguments suggesting that the morality of sexual relations should be based on subjective motives or 'sincere intentions,' stating that morality should be 'determined by objective standards' (quoted in Dillon, 1999: 56). The declaration distinguished between 'constitutional' homosexuality arising from innate instinct or a pathological condition judged incurable and 'transitory' homosexuality derived from environmental factors which it identified as 'false education,' the lack of 'normal sexual development', habit or bad example. But since, according to the CDF, constitutional homosexuality is innate, the Vatican advocated that constitutional homosexuals be treated with pastoral understanding so they might be 'sustained in the hope of overcoming their personal difficulties and their inability to fit into society' (Dillon, 1999: 56). But the CDF was nonetheless unequivocal in outlawing all homosexual acts as 'objectively disordered' regardless of their innate basis. According to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality. In sacred scripture they are condemned as a serious depravity and even presented as the sad consequence of rejecting God ... homosexual intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of' (Dillon, 1999: 56).

Only a matter of days later came the publication of John McNeill's book arguing for the morality of homosexuality and a revision of Catholic teaching. *The Church and the Homosexual* stood out as a direct challenge to the CDF's stance on homosexuality. Although it had taken four years to write, the book addressed the

very issues enshrined in the CDF document which was not an infallible teaching. Its importance was 'based on extrinsic authority rather than intrinsic argument' (McNeill, 1976: 11). McNeill's thesis was that new evidence emerging from the fields of Biblical studies, history, psychology, sociology and moral theology presented a serious challenge to every premise on which such teaching was based. McNeill was a theologian, psychotherapist and founding member of Dignity, the national association of gay and lesbian Catholics. He was also an admirer of the spirituality of Henri Nouwen and, in the years leading to the book's publication, had written on homosexuality for the same journals which had printed Nouwen's articles on spirituality.

McNeill challenged the traditionally held belief that the homosexual condition, and subsequently all homosexual activity, was contrary to the will of God and that it was God's intention that all humans should be heterosexual. He argued that the homosexual condition was according to the will of God and that God had created humans in such a way that their sexuality was not determined by their biology: 'We now know from psychology that a homosexual phase is a normal phase of the sexual maturing process; that there is a homosexual as well as a heterosexual component in every human being; that always and everywhere a certain percentage of humans emerge from the complex learning process as predominantly homosexually oriented through no fault of their own' (McNeill, 1976: 197). McNeill further contended that there was a 'divine purpose' in creating some people homosexual. Homosexuals, far from being a menace to the family and community, were 'endowed with special gifts and a divinely appointed task in the construction of a truly human society' (McNeill, 1976: 197). While moral theologians had traditionally believed that the love which united two homosexuals in a sexual union was sinful, separating them from the love of God and placing them in danger of damnation, McNeill argued that the love which unites homosexual partners could be judged as 'uniting them more closely with God and as mediating God's presence in our world' (McNeill, 1976: 198).

> The new empirical evidence in support of this thesis is, first of all, the psychological evidence that homosexuality is not necessarily an illness and the empirical evidence that there are many homosexual couples in stable unions whose relationship provides the context for mutual growth and fulfillment. Further, there is evidence of the work of the Spirit bringing into

> existence believing communities of homosexuals who in a spirit of love and forgiveness are seeking dialogue with that same institutional Church which so often in the past and in recent times has been their persecutor (McNeill 1976: 198).

Even though Nouwen continued to write about intimacy, his writings and papers from this period offer no reflection on these contrasting Catholic views of homosexuality. His reputation as a modern spiritual guide and teacher was spanning the denominations and he seems to have been careful in protecting his name. In 1976, he took a sabbatical at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota, from which emerged his tenth book, *The Living Reminder*, a study connecting ministry and spirituality through healing, sustaining and guiding. As in his previous writings, wounds preoccupy his thinking, especially 'wounding memories' that 'ask for healing. Feelings of alienation, loneliness, separation; feelings of anxiety, fear, suspicion; and related symptoms such as nervousness, sleeplessness, nail-biting – these are all part of the forms which certain memories have taken. These memories wound because they are often deeply hidden in the center of our being and very hard to reach' (Nouwen, 1982a: 21). Healing occurs when people allow feelings to 'become available' to themselves and means revealing that 'human wounds are most intimately connected with the suffering of God himself' (Nouwen, 1982a : 24-25). To be living reminders of God, ministers must be concerned above all with their own intimacy with God in Jesus Christ which then enables them to become intimate to other people. Intimacy and distance are, as I have said, recurrent themes of Nouwen's work. Here, he argues with greater force, that memory brings people closer to each other than physical presence:

> Physical presence not only invites but also blocks intimate communication. In our pre-resurrection state our bodies hide as much as they reveal. Indeed, many of our disappointments and frustrations in life are related to the fact that seeing and touching each other does not always create the closeness we seek. The more experience in living we have, the more we sense that closeness grows in the continuous interplay between presence and absence (Nouwen, 1982a: 39-40).

In 1977 Nouwen was appointed professor of pastoral theology at Yale. His books, public lectures and sermons had established him as an international figure in the

world of contemporary spirituality, although he seems not to have been as popular with the divinity school staff. Nouwen and his colleague, Margaret Farley, had been the first full-time Roman Catholic appointments to the faculty. Farley recalls that Nouwen was 'not exactly what Yale Divinity School had expected'. He had arrived there at 'a time when spirituality was still suspect among Protestants, but now, across the United States and the world, it has become a primary concern of all religious denominations. Nouwen was a major figure in all of that. He was so charismatic that he immediately awakened students in a way that was phenomenal. That sometimes made it difficult for him to relate to his faculty colleagues, and not all of them appreciated him' (Farley, 1997).

For Dittes, Nouwen was a pastoral theologian 'who made theology existential enough to become a living theology'. He had the rare gift of thinking intuitively and was a skilful artist, if not an original theologian: 'He was an intriguing mixture of somebody absolutely self-confident and somebody troubled. He had a huge ego and would place himself at the centre of things, combing that with a kind of wistfulness or sense of self-confusion. He was searching for something. I don't know what it was and I suspect he never found it' (Dittes, 1997).

The publication in June 1977 of a major collective Catholic theological study on sexuality undermined official teaching more significantly than even McNeill. The study had been commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America, the largest and oldest association of Catholic theologians in the United States, as a theological response to official church teaching on sexuality. Its theology stressed sexuality's creative and integrative purposes, broadening the Vatican 11 emphasis on the procreative and unitive purposes of marital sexuality (Dillon, 1999: 56). Contrary to the act-centred understanding of sexuality derived from an 'oversimplification' of the natural law theory of Aquinas, the theologians emphasised that a person-centred approach seriously acknowledging the cognitive, emotional, social and moral development of the whole person was faithful both to the biblical understanding of human nature and the core values of the Christian tradition. They stressed that homosexuals enjoyed the same rights to love and intimacy and incurred the same obligations as hetereosexuals. Rejecting both the narrow emphasis which *Humanae Vitae* had put on physical sexual acts and the CDF statement on homosexuality, the

authors argued that all sexual behaviour drew its meaning or significance from the intention or motivation of those involved.

Homosexuality was polarising the Catholic Church in America and Nouwen, ever careful to maintain good relationships on all sides, continued to avoid any public statements about the debate. But sexuality and spirituality were, in fact, rarely far from his thoughts. In 1978, during a sabbatical as scholar-in-residence at the North American College in Rome, he produced a series of reflections on solitude, celibacy, prayer and contemplation – 'four clown-like elements in the spiritual life' (Nouwen, 1979b: 3). Here again, the concept of intimacy permeates his writings. When he refers to the 'inner torments and restlessness' of men and women in religious communities reaching 'such an intensity that their primary concern has become their own physical and emotional survival,' it is not difficult to surmise that he is thinking about himself as much as he is the orders (Nouwen, 1979b: 12). He envisages solitude as the source of a lasting sense of intimacy, the place where 'we can reach the profound bond that is deeper than the emergency bonds of fear and anger' (Nouwen, 1979b: 13). In solitude, 'we come to know our fellow human beings not as partners who can satisfy out deepest needs, but as brothers and sisters with whom we are called to give visibility to God's all-embracing love' (Nouwen, 1979b: 13). Chastity, for Nouwen, means much more than sexual abstinence. It is 'the gentle guide to all forms of intimacy' (Nouwen, 1979: 16). Chastity makes intimacy possible by liberating it from worldly compulsions. Many people suffering from feelings of isolation and alienation find new hope and strength in experiments of togetherness as a community of celibate people:

> I often wonder if we do not think or feel that our painful experiences of loneliness are primarily results of a lack of interpersonal closeness. We seem to think: 'If I could just break through my fear to express my real feelings of love and hostility, if I could just feel free to hold a friend, if I could just talk honestly and openly with my own people. If I could just live with someone who really cares … then I would have again some inner peace and experience again some inner wholeness.' When any of these experiences have become reality to us we feel, in fact, a certain relief, but the question remains if it is there that the real source of our healing and wholeness can be found (Nouwen, 1979: 40).

It is true that Nouwen returns to the same question in all his books. But, as Glaser has pointed out, 'the message gets refined as Nouwen refines himself' (Glaser, 2001). Nouwen believed that as traditional patterns of human communication broke down and families, professions and villages no longer offered intimate bonds, the basic human condition of aloneness had entered deeply into people's emotional awareness to the extent that they were constantly tempted to want more from their fellow human beings than they could provide. '... when we expect a friend or lover to take away our deepest pain, we expect from him or her something that cannot be given by human beings. No human being can understand us fully, no human being can give us unconditional love, no human being can offer constant affection, no human being can enter into the core of our being and heal our deepest brokenness' (Nouwen, 1979: 41).

Death of Nouwen's Mother

The death of Nouwen's mother from cancer in October 1978 was a 'momentous event in his life' (Beumer, 1997: 44). Paradoxically, it drew him into an experience of loneliness - and into a new intimacy. Nouwen had always felt that his mother had been the one person who loved him unconditionally: 'Mother was dying and nobody denied it. Although her suffering was deep and mysterious, it was not hidden from us. We experienced the privilege of being close to her suffering, intimately connected with her pain, deeply united with her agony.' (Nouwen, 1984: 26). Over the years, he had always wondered what life would be like without her. He had become aware that, during his childhood, adolescence and adulthood, the maternal bonds had grown 'so deep and so intimate' that he would never be able to apprehend their full significance until after she had died (Nouwen, 1984: 33). From her he had come to feel 'an unqualified acceptance which had little to do with my being good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, close by or far away. In her I had come to sense a love that was free from demands and manipulations, a love that gave me a sense of belonging that could be found nowhere else ...She represented a reality of goodness and safety which was much larger than herself' (Nouwen, 1984: 34). As members of the family watched her lying motionless in a hospital bed in Holland, Nouwen sensed their desire for a response from the person who had held the family together: 'How great is the human desire for contact!' (Nouwen, 1984: 42). Nouwen also

remembered his father's tender words to him at the time, 'an intimacy that I had not known before' (Nouwen, 1984: 44). It is evident, though, that Nouwen is recording the passing of a profound relationship:

> It slowly dawned on me that she who had followed every decision I made, had discussed every trip I took, had read every article and book I wrote, and had considered my life as important as hers, was no longer ... Indeed, I had viewed the world through the eyes of her to whom I could tell my story ... The ever-present dialogue with her had suddenly come to an end (Nouwen, 1984: 56).

On his return to the United States, Nouwen felt confused and became more acutely aware of his mother's absence. But despite his sense of loss, he seems to have experienced her presence in a new way: 'In these weeks of mourning she died in me more and more every day, making it impossible for me to cling to her as my mother. Yet by letting her go I did not lose her. Rather, I found that she is closer to me than ever. In and through the Spirit of Christ, she indeed is becoming a part of my very being' (Nouwen, 1984: 60).

The death of Maria Nouwen, however, seems also to have affected Nouwen's ability to acknowledge and accept the intimacy of others. Dittes, who had known Nouwen more as a colleague than a friend, gave him pastoral support but Nouwen appears to have been unable to own the care being offered. Dittes' recollection gives a unique insight to Nouwen's mind at the time and sheds light on his behaviour in certain interpersonal relationships:

> When Nouwen told me his mother had died, we had a long conversation where I played the role of someone listening to him pouring out his grief. I tried to respond appropriately. It was the most intimate moment I ever had with him. A couple of days later I asked him how he was, to which he responded: 'I'm fine, except my mother died. Did you know that?' Three years later, in his final speech to the divinity school faculty, he thanked me for being so caring of his mother in her last days. I had met his mother once but had not seen her as she was dying. Nouwen transferred my attention to him as a time I had spent with his mother. I interpret that as characteristically Nouwen. Intimacy was a hard thing for him to sustain. Students also had the same experience of being welcomed briefly and momentarily into his intimacy. When he could not stand it no longer, he found ways to pull down the curtains (Dittes, 1997).

While Nouwen desired intimacy, especially with men, it seems it was not something easily sustainable. This could have been related to his fear about getting too close to people or to the fact that, while he could offer counsel so readily to others, he was not always able to receive it from others.[49] Jonas questions why, as someone trained in pastoral counselling, Nouwen failed to reflect more deeply on his mother's life and death in his writings. Given Nouwen's 'valid reputation as a great integrator of psychology and spirituality, his occasional selective inattention to psychological insight and emotional self-knowledge is puzzling' (Jonas, 1999: 30). Jonas notes that one of the hallmarks of Nouwen's public ministry was his advice that it was better to share vulnerable feelings with loved ones than to be isolated and emotionally self-reliant. But *In Memoriam* and *A Letter of Consolation* both make clear that he sometimes felt more comfortable sharing these feelings with his readers than with his family. According to Jonas:

> ... he writes that if he had told his mother straight-out how much he loved her and how much he relied on her, she might have become 'confused, embarrassed, or even offended. Or perhaps she would have simply called me a sentimentalist' [Nouwen, 1984: 35]. Both books make clear that Henri did not feel that his parents acknowledged or appreciated his rich emotional life. But Henri does not share with the reader how he *felt* about this. One can presume that some of the experiences that his mother discounted or rejected may have been critically important to Henri, but we hear almost nothing of this (Jonas 1999: 30).

Inner Loneliness

In February 1979 – four months after his mother's death – Nouwen embarked on a further sabbatical, spending another six months with the Trappists at the Abbey of the Genesee. His intention was 'to be with God in prayer' (Nouwen, 1994a: xii). During this time he identified his ambiguous relationships and ambivalent attitudes, and discerned new directions. A series of prayers, written over this period, reveal a man eager to change: 'I pray that my six months of retreat may make me more aware of your forgiving presence in my life and less concerned about performing well in

[49] John McNeill believes this is a familiar experience of priests (McNeill, 2001).

the eyes of my world' (Nouwen, 1994a: 4). It is apparent he is exhausted: 'Take my tired body, my confused mind, and my restless soul into your arms and give me rest, simple quiet rest' (Nouwen, 1994a: 5). Anxiety characterises his moods: 'Today, O Lord, I felt intense fear. My whole being seemed to be invaded by fear. No peace, no rest; just plain fear: fear of mental breakdown, fear of living the wrong life, fear of rejection and condemnation, and fear of you' (Nouwen, 1994a: 7). He senses he is 'self-centered, concerned about myself, my career, my future, my name and fame. Often I even feel that I use you for my own advantage' (Nouwen, 1994a: 10). A fortnight later he asks why he keeps relating to 'the Lord of my heart, mind, and soul' as 'one of my many relationships, instead of my only relationship, in which all other ones are grounded? Why do I keep looking for popularity, respect from others, success, acclaim, and sensual pleasures?' (Nouwen, 1994a: 17). He becomes increasingly aware of an innate over-sensitivity: 'The fact that I get so easily upset because of a disappointment, so easily angered because of a slight criticism, and so easily depressed because of a slight rejection, shows that your love does not yet fill me. Why, otherwise, would I be so easily thrown off balance?' (Nouwen, 1994a: 30).

The prayers show a man capable of considerable mood swings, aware of hostile and vengeful feelings towards people he feels let him down. Yet they also portray the writer as a person with a lonely heart anchored in a God who sometimes seems absent himself. Nouwen discerns his ministry as one which will enable him 'to join people on their journey and to open their eyes to see you' (Nouwen, 1994a: 49). He pleads with God to 'free me from my dark past, into which I often feel myself falling as if into a deep cistern' (Nouwen, 1994a: 50) and clearly identifies himself with 'all the people who experience failure in their search for a creative, affectionate relationship ... All around me I see the hunger for love and the inability to experience it in a deep and lasting way' (Nouwen, 1994a: 52). As his monastic stay draws to a close and his vocation to preach is re-affirmed, he is conscious that he is 'still carrying around with me heavy baggage of whatever kind – physical, mental, emotional' which might obstruct his calling to be a Christian witness and healer of others (Nouwen, 1994a: 86).

Despite the bouts of self-questioning which emerge through his times of prayer, Nouwen is clearly capable of creating memorable images of divine love which point to his gifts as a spiritual communicator:

> Dear Lord, today I thought of the words of Vincent van Gogh: 'It is true there is an ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea.' You are the sea. Although I experience many ups and downs in my emotions and often feel great shifts and changes in my inner life, you remain the same. Your sameness is not the sameness of a rock, but the sameness of a faithful lover. Out of your love I came to life; by your love I am sustained; and to your love I am always called back (Nouwen, 1994a: 80).

During his final year at Yale, Nouwen completed three more books developing the themes of displacement and loneliness. It is evident from his writings that he is eager to connect with God and his fellow human beings. Boredom, resentment and depression are all sentiments of disconnectedness and expressions of not belonging. 'In interpersonal relations, this disconnectedness is experienced as loneliness ... when we feel cut off from the human family, we quickly lose heart' (Nouwen, 1982b: 32-33). As a priest living away from his family and within a church which condemned homosexuality so vociferously, Nouwen may have felt this fragmentation acutely. He sees the possibility of integration through an intimacy with God in a community of silence: 'In this way we come to know each other not as people who cling anxiously to our self-constructed identity, but as people who are loved by the same God in a very intimate and unique way' (Nouwen, 1982b: 84-85).

The psychological effect of Nouwen's personal struggles were witnessed by a student, Yoshi Nomura. Unable to attend a farewell party in Nouwen's honour at Yale, Nomura was later telephoned by Nouwen in a distressed state of mind. Nomura visited Nouwen that night. 'He was alone when I got his apartment. He hugged me and thanked me. He explained that he needed to call because he felt he was alone and just vanishing from the earth. He was scared that he was somehow being taken away. He had been to the party but was disappointed that I could not be there. He was saddened by the fact that most of the close friendships he had developed at Yale seemed to have gone into dust and they might all have been in vain' (Nomura, 1998).

Nouwen's need to be centre-stage was never in doubt. In this instance, it seems he might have been attracted to Nomura whose absence at the party had triggered the loneliness. While it might be argued that Nouwen was using Nomura's absence to manipulate him into feeling guilty for his grief, it is also true that Nouwen was often heavily dependent on certain individuals to affirm him away from the limelight. LaNoue points out that Nouwen struggled with life in the academic world, torn between his career and his vocation. This created more loneliness for him: 'The competitive nature of the academic setting at Yale promoted mostly rivalry and isolation' (LaNoue, 2001: 29).

Missionary Spirituality

In 1981, Nouwen left Yale and was appointed an associate priest with the Maryknoll Community in South America.[50] Arriving in Peru, he experienced a sense of homecoming: 'This is where I belong. This is where I must be. This is where I will be for a very long time. This is home' (Nouwen, 1993a: 3). The full-time missionaries were impressed: 'He had left all things to follow Jesus – not only his family and friends but his tenure at a prestigious university. To move from being centre stage and plunge into a student learning situation in the middle of the Andes was a major personal adjustment and challenge - physically, psychologically and spiritually (McCrane, 1998).

Nouwen's journal records new insights into the nature of poverty, persecution, faith and justice. But his entries also reveal that his own inner preoccupations are never far from the surface. On Saturday, November 21, 1981, he reflects that 'true knowledge' of the existence of God is connected with an awareness of how he experiences himself: 'I am aware of all of the various parts of my body, and I "know" when I am

[50] The United States' president, Ronald Reagan, was shaping his policy towards Central America at the time, convinced it was rife with communists who posed a serious threat to the borders. A Jesuit priest from El Salvador, Rutilo Grande, had been martyred and the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, had been murdered in a hospital chapel while celebrating Mass because of his vigorous defence of the poor and powerless against the military and wealthy classes. Bolivia itself was subjected to its own internal turbulence. Between 1978 and 1984 there were 15 different governments. At times there was strong repression by the military, financial instability and a scarcity of basic products. Labour unions had been suppressed. The Catholic Church had made vehement protests and had, in Monsignor Jorge Manrique, a courageous leader. But the bishops and their clergy were faced with frequent attempts to intimidate and silence them. Many priests were jailed. Others murdered. Nouwen was aware of the dangers he faced.

hurting and when not. I am aware of my desire for food and clothing and shelter. I am aware of my sexual urges and my need for intimacy and community' (Nouwen, 1993a : 47). Three days later, he notes that he finds himself 'with the same old struggles' [of losing control and becoming isolated] in new and unfamiliar milieux: 'As I recognize my fears of being left alone and my desire for a sense of belonging, I may gradually give up my attempts to fill my loneliness and be ready to recognize with my heart that God is Emmanuel, "God-with-us," and that I belong to him before anything or anyone else' (Nouwen, 1993a: 53-54). On Sunday, December 27, Nouwen describes an Indian wedding ceremony for seven couples which he has attended that day. Lingering in his memory is the occasion's absence of emotion: 'What struck me most before, during, and after the event was the lack of any expression of affection whatsoever between the grooms and the brides. They hardly talked to each other; they did not touch each other except when the ritual demanded it. Not one kiss was ever exchanged' (Nouwen, 1993a: 90). In an entry for Friday, February 5, written during 'a deep depression,' he recounts his experiences of being an outsider in the community – tolerated but not accepted, liked but not loved: 'I crave personal attention and affection' (Nouwen, 1993a: 131). The following day, he admits to himself that the emotions of loneliness, isolation and separation which he experiences cause him to crave 'not so much recognition, praise, or admiration, as simple friendship' (Nouwen, 1993a: 131).

Nouwen's encounter with liberation theology in South America was deepened through a friendship with Gustavo Gutiérrez who knew Nouwen's work.[51] As the continent moved slowly towards democratisation, they discussed poverty, oppression and terrorism which continued to overshadow the halting process of change: 'Liberation theology was something new for Nouwen. I think his visit to Peru and Bolivia was for him the opportunity to be more open to the issues arising from poverty and the political climate in Nicaragua. From his experience here and in Nicaragua, where he had to be well protected by the police, he did very beautiful

[51] Gustavo Gutiérrez is a Peruvian priest and the founding father of liberation theology. For many years he has lived among the poor of Rimac, a slum in Lima. Gutiérrez says Nouwen told him that before going to Latin America he had not been conscious of the link between Christian spirituality and social and political commitment. 'But Nouwen was open to learn and at one point very radical in his expressions. He told me that, from then on, his spirituality would have to be different' (Gutiérrez, 1998).

work in the field of reverse mission. Nouwen was one of the best spiritual leaders of the 20th century, not only for his work in bridging the worlds of social justice and spirituality, but in stressing the importance of cultivating a contemplative dimension to a person's spiritual life which should always be part of any active commitment to social change. He was such a fine person when it came to understanding suffering. He said that sometimes it was important to be close to someone only because that person was suffering' (Gutiérrez, 1998).

In March 1982 Nouwen returned to the Abbey of the Genesee to devise a critique of 'reverse mission' (being a missionary from the south to the north).[52] The following year was appointed to the staff of Harvard as a professor of divinity.[53] His classes attracted large numbers. With his international reputation before him, Nouwen taught with 'a Pauline-determination to know nothing except Christ Crucified' (O'Laughlin, 1997). But some students involved in the hermeneutics of suspicion looked on Nouwen as 'someone else to be feared.' He was even accused of spiritual imperialism. Others found him prophetic. 'His presence in lectures was extraordinary. He would exhort his listeners to live 'Christ's reality right now!' He would declare ultimate truths and announce the Good News without a trace of self-doubt. He used Scripture in a way that I had never heard, suffused throughout with the keen insight of a post-Freudian psychologist. I felt at the time that Henri was a mix of evangelical preacher, Harvard intellectual and Catholic saint. His passion overflowed - quite outside the bounds of ordinary human experience. Many of us were awestruck' (Jonas, 1997).

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[52] Gutiérrez asked Nouwen to write the introduction to the English translation of book, *We Drink From Our Own Wells*. In it, Nouwen said the spiritual destiny of the people of North America was intimately connected with the spirituality of the people of South America. What was happening in the Christian communities of Latin America was part of the vocation to call the North to conversion.

[53] Founded in 1636, Harvard is the oldest university in the United States. It was named after an English Puritan minister, John Harvard, who left the original college his books and half his estate. At its inception, Harvard was under church sponsorship but gradually, during its first two centuries, it became liberated from clerical and political control. Its divinity school, established in 1815, had a pluralistic dimension by the time Nouwen arrived. Some students were following a Master of Divinity ministerial degree programme before being ordained in Protestant churches, a number were preparing for professional lay ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, while others were exploring their spiritual lives in a non-confessional context. Nouwen's classes regularly attracted up to 300 students. But Nouwen told friends that he did not find the atmosphere intimate. It did not provide a context where he could feel safe and, at the same time, deepen his spiritual life. It was a place of intellectual battle and intense competition.

Sexual Confusion

According to close friends, Nouwen's struggle with his homosexuality was never more intense than when he was at Harvard. Some friends claim Nouwen was 'ruthlessly unsympathetic' to a number of homosexuals because of his strict allegiance to church teaching. He apparently told them that the only way they could be acceptable to God was to obey the church's teaching on celibacy because homosexuality was an evil state of being. One friend claimed that Nouwen began taking Catholic doctrine 'in a very Northern European way, interpreting it literally and basically crucifying people on it.'[54] Such a position seems surprising in view of Nouwen's compassionate nature and his own writings on the subject. As his international reputation as a Catholic priest had grown, he may have felt obliged to uphold traditional doctrine. It seems more likely, however, that he was becoming increasingly tormented by his own struggles with homosexuality and his warnings to students might have been reminders to himself. Whatever the reason, it suggests that his own state of mind could not have been peaceful. O'Laughlin confirms the depth and intensity of Nouwen's depression and needs at the time (O'Laughlin, 1997).

Another friend, Bob Massie, claims neither Nouwen nor Harvard understood each other. Harvard was looking for 'a kind of star power that would enliven – but not offend – the community'. Nouwen was seeking an institutional equation that would allow him to resolve all the contradictions in his life – 'his desire for both prominence and hiddenness, his desire to be both bold and accepted, his desire alternately to embrace and to challenge Roman Catholic teaching (Massie in Porter, 2001: 14).

The church's attitude towards homosexuality and his own emotional reactions towards people of the same sex caused such intense anxiety that Nouwen visited a Franciscan-run centre in New Orleans which ministered to homosexual men and women. There, in a state of some perplexity over the demands of ecclesiastical teaching and his own calling, he met a New Mexican iconographer, Robert Lentz,

[54] The friend asked for anonymity.

himself homosexual and a former monk: 'He struck me as being incredibly tense, nervous and under a great deal of stress. He seemed to be an incredibly shy person, a very private person, and to allow very few people into his life. He was looking for spiritual guidance and his tenseness around these sexual issues made me feel very uncomfortable indeed' (Lentz, 1998). Nouwen commissioned an icon to help him consecrate his homosexual emotions and feelings to Christ. *Christ the Bridegroom* became a metaphor for his own struggle and desire for liberation.[55]

> No one could understand some of Nouwen's problems at Harvard, or why he ordered the icon from me, without recognising that he was a homosexual human being who was being grilled over the fire of church law and his own conscience, as formed by another era of spirituality. That explained why he looked so tortured. Nouwen never had any doubt in his mind that he was a celibate man but as he was such an incredibly emotional man it may have been difficult for him to be celibate with strong feelings for people. Part of Nouwen's reason for ordering the icon was to have a visual aid so he could offer the feelings and the confusion to God, yet also express his desire to remain celibate (Lentz, 1998).

Nouwen's sexual struggles were also brought into focus at Harvard because his part-time secretary, Michael Harank, was himself homosexual and Catholic. It was never easy for anyone to be a friend of Nouwen's, Harank claims, because Nouwen could make so many demands on that person. Harank believed he was asked by Nouwen to be his friend because he was one of the few people unafraid of being totally honest with him. He argues that Nouwen's intensity in friendship was rooted in 'a very deep, abiding and sometimes desperate desire to be loved and accepted' (Harank, 1997). It was an authentic desire for intimacy but always begged the question as to how a spiritual practice of friendship could develop and result in a genuine sense of intimacy. Friendship, for Harank, was dependent on a commitment to faithfulness, not manipulation, power or influence. Friendship grew into intimacy through fidelity and gradual vulnerability through trust.

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[55] Lentz had seen in a collection of ancient icons an image of Christ with St John the Evangelist, not in the characteristic depiction of the Last Supper where John reclines on Christ's chest, but one where Christ sits on a throne while John approaches him in a bowing gesture. After receiving the commission, Nouwen wrote to Lentz and told him this had been exactly what he had wanted. Friends say he placed it opposite his bed so it was the first image he saw in the morning and the last at night. Sometimes he placed it on the floor of a chapel, slightly raised, surrounded by freshly cut flowers and sumptuous cloths. It was said to draw people in with a remarkable intimacy.

> I also think one of the reasons he desired a friendship with me was the fact that I had finally come to the truth of accepting myself as a gay man. I think the freedom that comes with any form of deep self-acceptance, especially in the area of human sexuality, imparts with it a gift of freedom, where you are able to be who you are, then loved by God in the fullness of who you are and be able to accept the unconditional love of God. It was very clear to me from the beginning that Nouwen was a gay man but he was not able to say those words for a very long time. I believe the church which formed Nouwen spiritually deformed him sexually (Harank, 1997).

Harank's sense that Nouwen was gay was based not so much on Nouwen's external behaviour as Harank's own intuition. Nouwen's apartment at Harvard had a large poster board with many photographs. With the exception of a picture of his mother, the photographs all featured men, some of them 'handsome and attractive' students: 'Occasionally I would observe him in a group of people and watch him instinctively moving towards the young men in the group. This confirmed to me that he was indeed gay but severely suppressed because he never broached the subject with me at the time, even though he knew I were gay myself. I think he was terrified of the subject of sexuality at the time. He was terrified that someone would find out and expose him. He hid the terror in a disguise of friendliness' (Harank, 2001).

Nouwen's fears concerned not so much his own church but his readership, which included a large number of evangelicals. The United States had known a 'born again' president in Jimmy Carter. In 1980 all three presidential candidates professed to be 'born again' and used that identity in their campaigns. Evangelical publications flourished and Nouwen was invited to contribute to their magazines. He also became a friend of Charles Colson who was converted to Christianity after the Watergate affair in which he was implicated. As evangelical leaders became increasingly involved in social and political issues, the New Christian Right movement gained ground in the United States and, along with it, the Moral Majority organisation led by Jerry Falwell. Christians were urged to use their voices at the polls to instil Christian morals at every level of government. Gay rights had been one of the catalysts for this moral backlash. Nouwen, who was always keen to appeal across the political and religious spectrum, would never have supported the homosexual cause publicly, even though he was struggling with it internally.

It is reasonable to deduce, then, that Nouwen was living his life at two conflicting levels. Outwardly he was a prolific author and charismatic teacher, channelling his energy into maintaining his reputation as a popular spiritual leader, all the while displaying signs of hyperactivity, anxiety and exhaustion. These signs pointed to an inner life which was equally fraught. On the one hand there was a disciplined interiority built around a rhythm of prayer and eucharistic celebration; on the other there was a chaotic wrestling with his emotional longings as he reflected on the meaning of love. Restlessness, then, was manifest at two levels of his personality: inner uncertainties and an all-pervasive loneliness inspired him to write prolifically and repeatedly about the spiritual life as he was experiencing it; however, because he was unable to name the true nature of his struggles in print, the fears associated with them created a figure of tension who seemed always to be striving to achieve. The restlessness was complemented by a need to belong. An invitation to spend a year with the L'Arche movement came at a time when it was clear both to him and his friends that he was exhausted. After a long lecture tour in the United States, speaking about Nicaragua, he felt ' very tired, very frazzled and interiorly very fragmented. My whole body and my whole mind were extremely exhausted and I felt very alone and very lonely' (Nouwen, 1992: BBC).[56]

Jean Vanier intuited this vulnerability in Nouwen during his final year at Harvard.[57] 'It might have been a growing loneliness or the discrepancy between who he was and what he was living in an interior and personal sense - and the acclaim he was

[56] Nouwen had led retreats for Nicaragua's Sandinista leaders and for US senators and military personnel. In 1983 he joined a Witness for Peace delegation on the border of Honduras, shortly after a month's stay in Nicaragua. From interviews published at the time, it is clear that Nouwen felt compelled to return to the United States and call Christians to oppose the Reagan administration's war. With the backing of peace groups and the bishops' conference, he embarked on a six-week national speaking tour calling on churches to oppose the US-backed Contra war against Nicaragua's poor. He spoke in packed church buildings in different cities every day, calling for public opposition to the Reagan government's threat of full-scale invasion. At the end of his tour, just before he was about to speak to a crowded congregation in Miami, an anonymous caller left a message that a bomb had been planted in the church and would explode during his speech. Right-wing Nicaraguans, opposed to Witness for Peace, were behind the false alarm which had been planned to prevent the meeting going ahead.

[57] Dr Jean Vanier, the son of a former governor-general of Canada, is the founder of the worldwide L'Arche communities and Faith and Light communities for people with mental handicaps. L'Arche, which was formed in 1964, is an organisation of women and men with intellectual and physical disabilities who create a home together with assistants from different backgrounds and faith traditions. These assistants, like the core members themselves, have often been wounded by circumstances, accidents, structures, rejection and abuse.

receiving from the students. Somewhere there was a discrepancy between those two elements which became almost unbearable for him' (Vanier, 1997). Persuaded Nouwen would benefit from being in an environment where there would be permanent relationships within the context of a community of prayer, Vanier invited him to spend a year at the movement's base in Trosly, France. In 1985 Nouwen resigned from his Harvard position and abandoned university life. His decision shocked many in the academic world: he was at the apogee of his career as a world-renowned spiritual teacher.

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DEATH AND REBIRTH (1985-1990)

Henri Nouwen's move from Harvard to L'Arche marked a major transition at many levels. While it is true that he had become disenchanted with American academic life, the accompanying anxiety and exhaustion suggest he was struggling at a deeper level. As I shall argue, Nouwen's understanding of his calling and his search for a new context cannot be understood in isolation from his own emotional longing, especially his desire to be loved by another man. Maurice Monette, a former Catholic priest, confirms that, by 1985, the issue of homosexuality was starting to trouble Nouwen: 'A year earlier, when I had told him I was gay, he was very kind, very understanding but very un self-revealing about his own struggle. Within twelve months, however, he was seeking my help with his struggle over the same issue. In this process he did not misbehave. He was an honest searcher who tried to operate out of a deep integrity as he explored this part of himself which terrified him' (Monette, 1997).

During this time, the Vatican was formulating a more authoritarian statement on homosexuality in response to the 'grave disregard' of Catholic theologians to its previous letter a decade before. Nouwen would have been aware of the theological objections to Vatican teaching and the dissent it was causing in the Church. The 1986 letter defended the official position: the thinking was based, not on 'facile theological argument', but on Biblical testimony and church tradition. Although the particular inclination of an individual was not a sin, 'it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder' (CDF, 1986: 379). The CDF stressed the sinfulness and selfishness of homosexual acts: 'Homosexual activity is not a complementary union able to transmit life ... when [homosexual] persons engage in homosexual activity they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent' (CDF, 1986: 380).

Dillon draws attention to the fact that the Vatican made a point of criticising the 'pro-homosexual movement in the church'. The movement, it alleged, comprised of

'homosexual persons who have no intention of abandoning their homosexual behaviour' and who 'either ignore the teaching of the church or seek somehow to undermine it' (Dillon, 1999: 58-59). The letter underlined the authority of the hierarchy by reasserting that homosexual Catholics who rejected Christ's teaching while claiming to conform to it 'should not have the support of the bishops in any way'. The CDF instructed the bishops to sever church ties with groups representing 'contradictory' Catholics. This included organisations which both neglected or were ambiguous about the teachings of the church (Dillon, 1999: 59). Referring implicitly to the AIDS epidemic as a 'gay disease', the Vatican argued that even when the practice of homosexuality might seriously threaten the lives of large groups of people, its advocates refused to consider the magnitude of the risks involved. By contrast, the Vatican represented the church hierarchy which was concerned for those not represented by the 'pro-homosexual movement' and those who might be influenced by its 'deceitful propaganda'. The letter condemned violent speech and action against homosexuals but contextualised violence against gays as part of the larger problem of moral breakdown, which it implicitly attributed to the gay rights movement. The Vatican argued that 'when civil legislation is introduced to protect behaviour to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase' (CDF, 1986: 380-381). Dillon points out, however, that in general, and in accordance with Catholic teaching on the inherent goodness of the human person, a punitive attitude towards people with AIDS does not characterise official Catholic statements (Dillon, 1999: 59).

Becoming a Person

The climate of anger and fear in some parts of the Roman Catholic Church must have contributed to Nouwen's anxieties and disorientation. But there were other psychological factors. According to Bart and Patricia Gavigan, who counselled Nouwen in England during this period, Nouwen had found a home in places where he was admired (The Menninger Institute, Yale and Harvard) but this admiration had been based on his successes, his abilities, his talents, his gifts and scholarship. There were large parts of his personality that he had not allowed himself to examine because being successful had been his driving force in view of the family

expectations and his own talents: 'For most of his life he had lived at the point of his gifts. Because he had a vocation, his gifts facilitated his calling and his calling facilitated his gifts. He managed to live literally in a disjunctive, disintegrated and fairly disembodied state for many years. But that was only one highly developed section of his personality. Other areas had not been developed such as his ability to be faithful, his ability to trust love, his ability to believe his value regardless of his gifts and his ability to have significant relationships not based on what he could do or produce (Patricia Gavigan, 1998). Patricia Gavigan suggests Nouwen 'did not know what it was to be a person'; his main challenge after leaving academia had been to 'integrate his gifts into his being'. L'Arche was the first place where he could begin to deal with 'being' in a realistic and incarnational way, instead of through an approach which, she argues, was spiritualised and theorised:

> The wound of being, the wound of love, the wound of always needing to know he was loved was both Nouwen's incredible strength and glory of his life, and also the agony of his life. The wound was so deep it took forms which were obsessive (Patricia Gavigan, 1998).

Between August 1985 and July 1986, Nouwen spent long periods at the L'Arche Community in Trosly-Breuil, France. He and Vanier led independent lives but the separation caused Nouwen suffering because of Nouwen's 'intense need of friendship and his intense desire to give it' (Vanier, 1997). He needed a gratuitous friendship: 'Somewhere at the heart of Nouwen was that cry for a permanent intimacy which was more than just friendship' (Vanier, 1997). A priest at the community, Père Thomas, helped Nouwen who, in turn, felt he had been understood in depth.[58]

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[58] Père Thomas Philippe was a French Dominican priest who had co-founded L'Arche with Vanier and was considered its spiritual father. Nouwen concelebrated Mass with him and sensed that he was in the presence of a man in whom immense suffering and joy were united. Nouwen says Père Thomas' greatest insight was that the mystical life lies at the beginning of our existence and not just at the end: 'We are born in intimate communion with the God who created us in love. We belong to God from the moment of our conception. Our heart is that divine gift which allows us to trust not just God, but also our mother, our father, our family, ourselves, and the world. Père Thomas is convinced that very small children have a deep, intuitive knowledge of God, knowledge of the heart, that sadly is often obscured and even suffocated by the many systems of thought we gradually cultivate. Handicapped people, who have such a limited ability to learn, can let their hearts speak easily and thus reveal a mystical life that for many intelligent people seems unreachable' (Nouwen, 1989b: 48-49). Vanier believes the relationship between the two priests partly explained the change in Nouwen during his year at Trosly and gave him hope that his own 'aching loneliness' could become an instrument of God for the healing of others (Vanier, 1997).

> There was that deep cry for intimacy and friendship but also the question as to where he could live his ministry as a priest of Jesus. He wanted to reveal the name of Jesus. Throughout all his books, including the earliest ones, one can see that he himself became conscious gradually that he was wounded and that it was through his wounds that he could heal. Through his own woundedness he could really understand the wounds of other people. He entered into compassion because he had touched his own wounds. He discovered through his woundedness, his poverty and this terrible crying loneliness that mysteriously he could be an instrument of God for healing of people (Vanier, 1997).

Vanier argues that the insecurity within Nouwen, formed (he believes) by the discrepancy in his personality between loneliness and admiration, was tamed by the safety he felt within the L'Arche community. It was a safety he had not readily experienced at other stages of his life. Vanier remains convinced that Nouwen was not aware of the origins of his loneliness. It was an unanswered craving which took shape in the form of 'phenomenal anguish', a pattern associated with artists. Out of Nouwen's poverty had sprung an artistic genius:

> Aristotle said that, if you are not loved, you are admired. You saw this double movement with Nouwen: a sense of not being loved and loneliness - and a terrific need for admiration. Through all that the power of God was working. That is where I see the mystery of Henri Nouwen. He shed light on reality through the Gospels and shed light on the Gospels through experience. That was part of his genius, yet at the same time he was a little and needy person, crying out for love, not just for human beings but for an experience of God (Vanier, 1997).

A lay assistant, Mirella Di Sabato observed Nouwen's prostrations before the Blessed Sacrament at Trosly. They point to a man rooted in spiritual intimacy: 'I really sensed that he was in the presence of God and that God was with him. I sensed a communion between the two very strongly. I saw the transformation of his face, his eyes and the excitement of his voice. In his words you could tell that something was happening inside of him. There was a kind of unifying quality of his person. In this prayerful atmosphere it seemed his whole person was becoming united. He was more unified and more centred the longer he stayed' (Di Sabato, 1997).

A letter written by Nouwen to academics back at Harvard suggests the new context was enabling him to grow spiritually: 'Being at L'Arche in France is a real gift. I feel very much supported by the community, and am having ample time to write. Once, a few years ago, my spiritual director asked me: "What do you really want?" Without hesitation I answered: "Time to pray and write." He said: "Well, maybe your desire shows you your vocation." I never thought that I would ever find the place to live that vocation, but now I am closer to it than ever. Prayer is still hard. It feels as if the busy years in Cambridge are still crowding my heart and mind. I still feel driven to do too much. But at least I am in the right place to learn to pray again'.[59]

But as his journal, published as *The Road to Daybreak*, reveals, Nouwen continued to struggle with inner anger and feelings of rejection from friends. For example, when Robert Jonas was unable to visit Nouwen in France as planned, Nouwen had felt sad, hurt and rejected, especially as he had gone to some lengths to welcome him. Nouwen's feelings of resentment lingered until Jonas scheduled another visit some weeks later. Only then could Nouwen begin to think about forgiving him. Jonas apologised for having unintentionally hurt his friend and explained the inevitable circumstances. Jonas thought the matter was over but was surprised to discover that, when Nouwen's journal was published, a full account of the episode appeared in print: 'The depression that hit me when my long-awaited friend Jonas did not come to visit never totally left me ... often the deepest pains are hidden in the smallest corners' (Nouwen, 1989b: 34).

Jonas comments: 'It seemed at the time that Henri was choosing to express his anger through the book. If he had been angry with me in a more direct way, we could have cleared it up. But I had learned that Henri could be indirect, perhaps trying to address things through his writing which would have been better handled face to face' (Jonas, 1997). Following subsequent discussions with other friends of Nouwen, Jonas realised that, in this instance, Nouwen had given him ' a role in an inner drama which had been going on throughout Nouwen's life. There always seemed to be

[59] This letter is kept by Simone Landrien in her own Nouwen archives at Trosly.

people who were abandoning Nouwen or failing to make him the centre of attention' (Jonas, 1997).[60]

On the surface the journal is a somewhat uneventful diary charting Nouwen's encounters with people and visits to places of interest. A closer examination reveals that Nouwen's entries are at their most effusive when he writes about the men he meets that year; references to women are brief and transitory. For example, in one entry, he records: 'Madame Vanier, Paquita, Barbara, Simone, Mirella, and many others welcomed us warmly and showed sincere joy at seeing both of us again. The most important event of the day for me was a lunch with Jonas and Nathan' (Nouwen, 1989b: 144).

The death of his friend, John Lucey, from AIDS on October 24, prompts Nouwen to make his first personalised reference to homosexuality in any of his books or articles to date, suggesting that his move to L'Arche had made him a less inhibited writer, if not yet a less inhibited person. He recalls visiting Lucey some years before in San Francisco: ' John told me about his homosexuality and his life in the San Francisco gay community. He did not try to defend his way of living or apologize for it. I remember his great compassion for the people he spoke about, but also his critical remarks about snobbism and capitalism in the San Francisco gay community ... Seldom have I known anyone who was so eager to have me understand and learn. He was so non-judgemental, self-possessed, and honest that I came to think of him as a just man' (Nouwen, 1989b: 52). The following day, Nouwen recalls how his time with John Lucey showed him 'the ravaging powers' of AIDS: 'Like a wild animal caught in a cage, he could find no rest, and his whole body moved in pain... Many AIDS patients are rejected by family and friends. But Rose's love for her son grew stronger every day of his illness. No condemnation, no accusation, no rejection, but love as only a mother can give' (Nouwen, 1989b: 53).

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[60] Nouwen's journal at the time makes it clear that his need for affection troubled him:'Oh, I am so little in control of my feelings and emotions. Often I have to just let them pass through me and trust that they won't hang around too long' (Nouwen, 1989b: 34). It was an issue he discussed during spiritual direction with Pere Thomas who told him that, in a highly psychologised culture, people had developed great sophistication in analysing and expressing many nuances of affections. Nouwen believes that 'this highly developed psychological consciousness' sometimes prevents people from 'reaching that place in us where the healing powers are hidden. Pere Thomas' greatest gift, as I see it, is his ability to speak about that place and mobilize its hidden gifts. He calls that place the heart' (Nouwen, 1989b: 47).

Rose Lucey's recollection of Nouwen's visits to her son suggests that both men bonded: 'My son had become disillusioned with the church and it was the first time he had ever trusted one of his parent's friends. John opened his heart to Henri and felt free to tell him things that Henri had never dreamed of. Henri also opened his own heart to John and was absolutely honest with him. Henri sensed that John was aching for a kindred spirit in the church' (Rose Lucey, 1997). Rose Lucey did not specify the nature of that honesty but, in view of her comment, it is fair to assume that Nouwen had shared something of his own sexual struggles with a man who was dying of AIDS. The edited journal does not include any reference to the fact that Nouwen spoke openly to John Lucey about his own life which indicates that either Nouwen or his editors wished not to reveal this, even though there are many other instances in the book where Nouwen discusses his own personal responses to people. When writing about homosexuality, there seems to be more hesitation. But there is no caution about highlighting the human need for affection. Nouwen objectifies his own situation when he writes: 'An increasing number of people have no home. They live alone in small rooms hidden away in large cities. When they return from work there is nobody to welcome them, kiss them ... there is nobody to cry with, laugh with, walk with, eat with, or just sit with' (Nouwen, 1989b: 59).

Falling in Love

What emerges most powerfully in these entries is Nouwen's obvious attraction to a young male assistant at the community, Nathan Ball. In between spiritual reflections on the mentally disabled, community life, icons and poetry, he describes the birth of a new friendship as 'a beautiful experience'. Out of the many loving and caring friends he has met at L'Arche, 'someone is emerging who is becoming a friend, a new companion in life, a new presence that will last wherever I go' (Nouwen, 1989b: 98-99). The entry, written on Saturday, December 21, was prophetic in that Nathan Ball did become his closest companion for the rest of his life and was the last person to see him alive. How he knew this with such certainty can be only imagined, for

Ball has never spoken about the intimate nature of the friendship.[61] But in this one entry, we learn from Nouwen about Ball's upbringing, spiritual pilgrimage and his personality. He is a person of 'deep compassion,' and shows 'generous affection' to handicapped people. Writing of the friendship for the first time in the journal, Nouwen explains:

> Over the past few months we have gradually come to know each other. I was not aware of how significant our relationship had become for me until he left for a month to visit his family and friends in Canada. I missed his presence greatly and looked forward to his return.
>
> Two days ago he came back, and tonight we went out for supper together. I felt a need to let him know how much I had missed him. I told him that his absence had made me aware of a real affection for him that had grown in me since we had come to know each other. He responded with a strong affirmation of our friendship from his side. As we talked more about past experiences and future plans, it became clear that God had brought us close for a reason. Nathan hopes to begin theological studies in Toronto in September and plans to live at Daybreak during that time. I am filled with gratitude and joy that God is not only calling me to a new country and a new community, but also offering me a new friendship to make it easier to follow that call" (Nouwen, 1989b: 99).[62]

Earlier in the journal, Nouwen discloses that he has been offered a job as pastor of the L'Arche Community at Daybreak but it seems that the thought of Ball joining him there eases any anxieties he might have had. Nouwen writes about sexuality at one point but the entry is distanced from any reference to Ball. Sexuality, he argues, should not be considered a private affair. Sexual fantasies, sexual thoughts and sexual actions for the Christian can become a disservice to the community, he explains. The mental and spiritual health of a community is largely dependent on the

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[61] When interviewed, Ball felt unable to talk about his friendship with Nouwen. But he has since written about Nouwen in a collection of essays. ' As a heterosexual person I was a safe person for Henri to love deeply, and I in turn was eager for his friendship and companionship', he explains. 'In retrospect it is clear to me that we needed each other. We were able to support each other in concrete ways: Henri in his desire to be faithful to his vow of celibacy as a Roman Catholic priest and I in the hope that I would grow in my capacity for intimacy and commitment and might one day marry' (Ball in Porter, 2001: 92).

[62] Reflecting on their friendship 15 or more years after it began, Ball admits they experienced an 'immediate connection of mind and heart' (Ball in Porter, 2001: 92). He says he was 'drawn to Henri quickly and, at the beginning, without reservation' (Ball in Porter, 2001: 93). He remembers his large hands wrapped around a wineglass like a blanket, 'hands that I would eventually come to know as the barometer of his soul – hands that would give a warm embrace or a reassuring pat on the back' (Ball in Porter, 2001: 93).

way its members live 'their most personal lives' as a service to others: 'The complications of living a chaste life are obvious. If I keep my sexual life a hidden life (just for myself), it will gradually be split off from the rest of my life and become a dangerous force. I wonder more and more how much of the sexual compulsions and obsessions that we experience are the result of this privatization of our sexuality. What remains hidden, kept in the dark and uncommunicable, can easily become a destructive force always ready to explode in unexpected moments' (Nouwen, 1989b: 169). Nouwen argues that the first step towards chastity lies in knowing that one's sexuality is personal and communal. Becoming accountable to the community for one's inner life can be achieved through the sacrament of confession. 'This accountability will gradually take away the obsessive and compulsive quality of my sexual thoughts and fantasies' (Nouwen, 1989b: 169). Nouwen may have started to feel guilty about his sexual longings. It was confirmed to me during my research that Nouwen often went to confession in connection with such concerns.

The spiritual significance of friendship is a recurring theme in *The Road to Daybreak.* Writing on Saturday, May 3, 1986, Nouwen describes a long weekend he and Ball spent in Rheims:

> Friendship does not grow strong and deep when you do not give it the time and attention it deserves. My friendship with Nathan has been one of the most sustaining and nurturing aspects of my stay at Trosly.
>
> The great joy of our friendship is that we both deeply feel that it is Jesus who has brought us together so that we would be able to help each other grow closer to him. Therefore, we want to spend time together in prayer and silence acknowledging that the love we feel for each other is a love that is not of our own making (Nouwen, 1989b: 175).[63]

An entry for Monday, May 5, reveals that Nouwen and Ball shared 'our struggles and our hopes.' The more they talked about their lives, the more Nouwen became aware of the 'inner ambiguities that lead me away from the light and make me hide in dark places' (Nouwen, 1989b: 177).

[63] Ball's account of the retreat is less emotional: 'Our retreats had a confessional quality as we explored what it means to foster a supportive spiritual friendship ... His desire for time apart and his thirst for an active life of prayer including daily Eucharist drew me into a place of spiritual intimacy that I could not easily access on my own' (Porter, 2001: 94).

Three weeks later, Nouwen recounts his visit to the Castro, the gay district of San Francisco, where many young men are dying of AIDS, an undeniable fact which, to Nouwen's way of thinking, turns the word 'gay' into a euphemism (Nouwen, 1989b: 199). Behind the opulent and garish exteriors lies an immense fear, he notes, along with guilt, feelings of rejection and anger. In the atmosphere of the moment, it seems he discerns his own desires or at least speculates to himself on whether or not 'gayness' could ever be equated with 'happiness': 'It seemed as if everyone was waiting for something that would bring them a sense of being deeply loved, fully accepted, and truly at home. But evident in the eyes of many was deep suffering, anguish, and loneliness, because what they most seek and most desire seems most elusive. Many have not been able to find a lasting home or a safe relationship, and now, with the AIDS threat, fear has become all-pervasive (Nouwen, 1989b: 199-200).

Nonetheless, Nouwen also detects the generous spirit which AIDS has unleashed. 'Many people are showing great care for each other, great courage in helping each other, great faithfulness, and great love ... As I saw the countless gay men on the streets, I kept thinking about the great consolation that Jesus came to offer. He revealed the total and unlimited love of God for humanity. This is the love that the Church is called to make visible not by judging, condemning or segregating, but by serving everyone in need. I often wonder if the many heated debates about the morality of homosexuality do not prevent the Christian community from reaching out fearlessly to its suffering human beings (Nouwen, 1989b: 200). Nouwen cites a pastoral letter from Archbishop Roger Mahony about caring for people with HIV and AIDS and for gay men and women in general. The archbishop had called for the establishment of a hospice for AIDS victims and the formation of gay Catholic groups that would help their members live chaste lives according to Biblical and Church teaching.

That summer, in Los Angeles, Nouwen met his former student Chris Glaser, author of *Uncommon Calling: A Gay Christian's Struggle to Serve the Church* which Nouwen describes as 'a book full of pain, full of struggle, but also full of hope ... a public testimony of his faithful search to integrate his sexuality with his faith' (Nouwen, 1989b: 202). Glaser reveals that he took Nouwen to a gay disco: 'He was

fascinated by the pulsing beat of the music. His head was bobbing and his arms moving. He loved that and did not seem uncomfortable in that context. But he did seem uncomfortable when I took him to a gay video bar. There were 200 gay men crowded together, watching gay videos and comedy clips. However, they were not interacting. Nouwen was so interactive himself that he could not imagine going to a public place just to sit and watch videos' (Glaser, 1997).

Glaser saw Nouwen as 'a living reminder of Christ because Christ would not have been afraid to go to a gay bar or a gay community; to stay in the home of a gay couple or to befriend a gay person; to love a gay person and to regard a gay person with love.' Nouwen had manifested 'the healing of Jesus' in his support for the gay and lesbian community and represented 'Jesus to me more than the church' (Glaser, 1997).

Nouwen's next journal entry reflects on a visit to Donald Reeves, Anglican rector of St James's, Piccadilly, London, which had become a centre for alternative spirituality. A man of many gifts, Reeves impressed Nouwen by the way he had developed a church for people of all branches of the Christian faith and non-Christians: 'I felt invigorated just being with him ... I controlled my impulse to help and asked for simple fellowship' (Nouwen, 1989b: 205). But Reeves' recollection of Nouwen that day suggests the spiritual writer was less assured: 'He particularly asked me what I did after I had had a big celebration or given a big lecture and got the adulation of lots of people. He said that was just the time when the demons got going and you got tempted in all sorts of ways. It was something to do there with how you cope with yourself, and the sorts of relationships and friendships which, as a public person, you need to cultivate or have in a private capacity. He was a very vulnerable man, searching for something, somebody, somewhere, somehow which would give him the peace he was looking for. He was rather different from the person I had imagined him to be from his writings. He came across as a much more complicated person – more human, gruff, edgy, and understanding than I had expected from the rather apostolic and systematic way in which he wrote about things' (Reeves, 1997).

After six weeks' travelling, Nouwen returned to L'Arche in France, writing in his journal how much he has missed Ball: 'Nathan was so busy in his foyer that we had to wait until this afternoon to see each other. I was so eager to reconnect with him and feel welcomed back by him that the delay was painful and frustrating. But when he could finally leave his work and come to my room, we had a blessed time together. It was like a spiritual debriefing' (Nouwen, 1989b: 210). Nouwen 'confesses' to Ball his 'many ups and downs in the struggle to remain anchored in Jesus', moments of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. He then feels 'more connected' (Nouwen, 1989b: 211). His entry for Sunday, July 6, suggests Ball's friendship is a divine gift: 'I will never think about this year without a deep gratitude for my friendship with Nathan and our long hours of sharing our joys and pains. Often it seems to me that the main reason for my being in Trosly was to be given this friendship as the safe context for a new vocation. Whatever happens at Daybreak, I am not going to be alone in my struggle, and Nathan will be there with me to keep me faithful to my promises' (Nouwen, 1989b: 216).

In the weeks before joining Daybreak, the L'Arche community at Richmond Hill, Ontario, Nouwen visited Russia with friends to study Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* painting. Bob Massie who accompanied him recalls Nouwen being 'physically exhausted. He seemed lost and uncomprehending, practically like a child ... in our private conversations it became clear he was struggling with many uncertainties and unhappiness. Looking back, it seems as though Henri was enduring a sort of final spiritual test as he prepared to commit himself to life at Daybreak. He seemed trapped in the house of fear about which he had spoken so many times. After all his travels, he desperately needed and wanted a home ... He was terrified of disappointment. It was almost as though Daybreak were his last chance' (in Porter, 2001: 15).

There are those who still question Nouwen's motives for joining the community and caring for the mentally impaired. Dupré saw it as ' typical grandiose' Nouwen: 'He understood with the heart and that meant going all the way with something. He was a very clumsy person and going in for work he was not fit to do' (Dupré, 1997). Reeves also expressed doubts about Nouwen's commitment. 'He said that he was going to live in a community where people did not know how famous he was and

who could not read his books. I found that absolutely admirable in one way but I wondered how really natural it was for him to do that and whether he was making an enormous statement about something. The way he talked about it struck me as being rather like a pose. It did not come from the heart. I felt that if he really meant this, he would not have told anybody. He would have just done it' (Reeves, 1997).

The way Nouwen's decision was interpreted, then, contrasts significantly with his own official perceptions into which he reads spiritual significance: 'I was living in accordance with God's love for me as a university professor but at one point it felt suddenly that there was a conflict between my career and my vocation, that my career no longer allowed me to continue my vocation. Then suddenly I was at a loss. Finally I discovered L'Arche and L'Arche discovered me. I was invited to do something I wasn't prepared for. I did not know anything about mentally handicapped people. I had never studied them. I was not interested. I am totally unpractical but God called me there. In this case God's will was not totally in line with my specific talents' (Nouwen, BBC: 1992).

Nouwen had felt a deep inner sense of not being simply called to do a certain job, but to live 'some particular kind of life'. Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard had all been professional choices. L'Arche had emerged out of his own need for a community and a home he had never found in the United States: 'The community called me and said "maybe we can offer a home for you." That was not what the universities had ever said to me. They had said "maybe you can do a job for us" (Nouwen, BBC: 1992). Nouwen, here, is being disingenuous. He had sought positions in American universities and could even be seen to have manipulated his way through them, devising his own courses and carving his own path. To suggest that universities had not provided him with a sense of belonging is unreasonable and suggests that Nouwen was projecting his own search for love onto institutions which had helped build his fame.

Adam

Nouwen began his ministry at Daybreak in August 1986, moving into a basement bedroom in one of the community's eight homes. He was to spend the next years

living and working among the disabled, known as 'core members' because they are at the heart of the community life which forms around them. Nouwen was assigned to care for Adam Arnett, a 25-year-old man who could not speak or move without assistance, and suffered from frequent seizures. He believed he had been entrusted with the body of another:

> What was becoming important for me was Adam and our privileged time together when he offered me his body in total vulnerability, when he gave me himself, to be undressed, bathed, dressed, fed, and walked from place to place. Being close to Adam's body brought me close to Adam (Nouwen, 1997: 34).

These memories are being rekindled shortly after Adam's death – ten years after their first encounter. Nouwen is clearly eager to convey the intimacy of their friendship and its sacred quality: 'Eventually I found myself confiding my secrets to him, telling him about my moods, my frustrations, my easy and hard relationships, and my prayer life. What was so amazing about all this was the very gradual realisation that Adam was really there for me, listening with his whole being and offering me a safe space to be' (Nouwen, 1997: 35-36).

Nouwen explains that Adam – the 'silent, peaceful presence in the centre of my life' – was helping him become rooted not only in the new community but also in his own self (Nouwen, 1997: 36). He admits that he 'started to experience a true relationship with and love for Adam' (Nouwen, 1997: 37). Adam Arnett became Nouwen's trustworthy companion, explaining by his presence what Nouwen says he should have known all along: that 'what I most desire in life – love, friendship, community, and a deep sense of belonging – I was finding with him. His very gentle being was communicating with me in our moments together, and he began to educate me about love in a profoundly deep way' (Nouwen, 1997: 37). Nouwen believes that 'somewhere deep down' Adam 'knew' he was loved, even though he could not reflect on the heart as 'the centre of our being, the core of our humanity where we give and receive love' (Nouwen, 1997: 37).

Nouwen writes that, as he grew closer to Adam, he came to experience Adam's 'most beautiful heart' as the 'gateway to his real self, to his person, his soul, and his

spirit.' His transparent heart reflected also 'the heart of the universe and, indeed, the heart of God' (Nouwen, 1997: 38). Nouwen says he perceived the 'divine significance made visible in him. Adam, I believe, had a heart where the Word of God was dwelling in intimate silence' Adam led him to 'that intimate indwelling where the deepest significance of his and my humanity was unfolding' (Nouwen, 1997: 38). [64]

Harank, meanwhile, sees Nouwen's transition to L'Arche as an attempt to shorten the distance between his writing and his life: 'I think his decision to live in a community of very broken and wounded people was a desire to close that gap' (Harank, 1997). It is clear from correspondence between Nouwen and Harank that Nouwen feels he can depend on their friendship:

> Thanks, thanks, thanks for your beautiful letter, so full of your affection and love. It was good to be with you and share with you my struggles and my joys. It feels very, very good to be known and loved by you. I am so glad we found that place where we can be vulnerable together and feel together the strength of God's love. It is a real joy to know that you are there, know me, love me and hold me close in your prayers. You are very close to me and I want you to claim me as a friend who loves you deeply and wants to give you all you ask for. God has been very good to bring us closer to each other. ... After all was set up I flew to Calgary to spend a week with Nathan at his parents' retreat center. It was a glorious week. Much time to sleep, eat, pray and solidify our friendship.[65]

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[64] Downey wisely sees Nouwen's book, *Adam*, as a 'highly interpreted' account of a deeply wounded man, casting his life story in terms of the hidden life, mission, passion and death of Jesus. In Christian tradition, Christ is the Second Adam, the New Adam. For Nouwen, Adam Arnett is another Christ, the New Christ among us. But there is no evidence that he believed this at the time. As I have explained, the book was written after Arnett's death in 1996, a decade after they first met. One might question why Nouwen did not write the book earlier. Downey notes that, in *Adam*, readers of different cultures, ages and temperaments can witness Nouwen's 'rare ability' to speak from and to human experience in very personal language. In view of his candour in disclosing his own experience, readers feel they know Nouwen intimately: 'In characteristic style, through *Adam*, the reader is touched by Nouwen's irresistible vulnerability. But there is something more. We come to know Adam Arnett, and in knowing him we come to deeper insight into the mystery of Christ.' (Michael Downey, *Weavings*, vol. xiii, No 5 (Sept/Oct 1998), p.47).

[65] The postcard was shown to me by Michael Harank who gave permission for it to be quoted in this thesis.

Breakdown

Nouwen's friendship with Ball became the 'the safe place' in the midst of all the transitions and changes: 'Somehow I made Nathan the centre of my emotional stability and related to the life in community as something I would be able to cope with. In this way my dependence on Nathan prevented me from making the community the true centre of my life. Unconsciously, I said to myself, "I already have a home. I do not really need another one." As I entered community life more deeply, however, I became gradually aware that the call to follow Jesus unreservedly required me to look for God's guidance more in the common life with handicapped people than in a unique and nurturing friendship' (Nouwen, 1989b: 223).

Unable to fulfil Nouwen's emotional needs, Ball distanced himself from the friendship. The withdrawal sparked Nouwen's emotional breakdown. Bart and Patricia Gavigan deduced that, what was at stake for Nouwen, was directly associated with faith, the nature of love, God, and Nouwen's own capacity to be able to survive in the psychological darkness: 'I think it had very real consequences in life. It was on the edge of a precipice. It was dangerous, critical and it was a deep struggle of the soul, right at the core of his being. All the things he had lived by and held dear were being sieved inside him. He was brought into a panorama of awareness, possibility and being that he had always been denied or denied himself. The relationship with Nathan was a trigger for many things he had not known, not named, not accepted or not admitted' (Patricia Gavigan, 1998). [66]

Gavigan believes the years 1986-1988 constituted Nouwen's most serious period of crisis which 'brought into being' many aspects of the person he was and had been created to be. He found a home at L'Arche which had released him to 'start to be and to grow'. But the result was regression: 'He went back to a very tiny child state that had always been there but that he had repressed, or withheld, or with which he not

[66] Patricia Gavigan believes it would be 'naïve and foolish' to say Nouwen was not manipulative. In friendships, she says, the question would be about whether a person would be manipulated or not. 'One's boundaries become important in such situations. If you know where you were within your boundaries, you know how to relate freely and lovingly to someone who is manipulative' (Patricia Gavigan, 1998).

had any way to deal. He then began to deal with it consciously as an adult. Certainly his faith, his trust and sense of being were more deeply challenged and more significantly challenged during that period of time than any other. The fruit was positive but it did not come for many years. His perception of God's love for him and everyone's love for him was bound up with people's admiration of him because that was his whole experience of love for him (Patrician Gavigan, 1998).

Patricia and Bart Gavigan confirmed that Nouwen shared with them his struggles in the area of sexuality and the fact that he was in love with Nathan Ball. But Nouwen, they felt, was inexperienced in understanding the nature of the longings. He had been a deeply wounded man in key areas of affectivity, particularly of love and of knowing he was loved; therefore the specific struggle with his homosexuality intensified. He valued and wanted to live a priestly, celibate and chaste life with integrity but the struggle over his relationship with Ball 'became a very central part of his wound to which he was totally attached' (Bart Gavigan, 1998). It was, however, more than a struggle with sexuality: the situation necessitated the discernment to differentiate between attraction and infatuation, and love for another human being. In accordance with what he had written about the need for homosexuals to be available to themselves, Nouwen did not want to deny his own emotions or suppress his feelings. At the same time, however, he knew he was vowed to chastity: 'A person trying to deal with their sexuality enters a place where the issue becomes so inflammatory it resembles wood being placed in a furnace. Nouwen never denied the attraction but questioned the living out of his priesthood. A part of him longed not to do that, but a very deep part of him wanted to do that more than anything else. He was a person of integrity and faithfulness but there were certain points where he became very confused (Bart Gavigan, 1998).

It must be acknowledged here that Patricia Gavigan does not think the underlying issue for Nouwen was his homosexuality. She argues that it concerned his humanity and was constructed around the questions: 'What is it to love and be loved? What is it to have a meaningful relationship of love? Can my feelings be traced back to childhood? Ball 'felt himself hugely assailed by a mass of emotion that was quite shocking to him and not very understandable. In our society people equate huge amounts of emotion with a sexual interpretation. Nouwen was a huge person. If he

was depressed, he was hugely depressed. If he was happy, he was hugely happy. If he was emotionally stimulated, he was hugely stimulated. Given that what he met in Ball stirred and triggered masses of emotional responses in him, there was a lot emotional force around which could have been wrongly categorised by people' (Patricia Gavigan, 1998).

Bart Gavigan agrees the issue for Nouwen was not sexuality but obsessive fantasy which touched the wounded child in him: 'He needed to be held and the most healing holding for Nouwen was preferably done by people who were not gay at all because the holding actually touched the little boy in Nouwen. It did not confuse the little boy. Nouwen's longing was much simpler than its sexual expression. It felt like it was sexual but in fact stemmed from the wounded boy in him. He longed to regress in order to be healed. That little child wanted to be held. He wanted to own that child. You were not dealing with a six –year- old but someone who was two- years-old or 18- months- old. What he needed was to be held in a safe way and with great purity. One had to keep separating out what was agony at a sexual level and what was an agony at a much deeper level (Bart Gavigan, 1998).[67]

The Gavigans give important insights into Nouwen's struggle with his own being which he had never before encountered. They also reveal that, during the early stages of breakdown, Nouwen's relationship with his family was central to his emotional insecurities. Patricia Gavigan noted that Nouwen talked about his father emphasising the rational: the importance of thinking well and impressively, then verbalising it. His initial reluctance to talk about his problems were, she confirmed, associated with his family background, rather than his sexuality. In order to come in touch with himself at a level of being, he had to confront and move beyond the rational which had been such a powerful standard in his family: 'To outgrow the limitations of his natural family was a great problem' (Patricia Gavigan, 1998). Bart Gavigan

[67] Bart Gavigan points out that people tend to 'sin,' not from their areas of abundance, but from their areas of deprivation. This was particularly true of Nouwen who was deprived in experiencing, feeling, creating or believing love. Nouwen was always vulnerable at the point of his need and what would resource that need. 'You might arrange a breakfast with him and he would be having breakfast with someone else. He would not have forgotten you and intended to have breakfast with you but it was important for him to meet this other person so you would end up having breakfast with both of them. It was not a general manipulation, even though it looked conscious. It was a vulnerability at the point of need' (Bart Gavigan, 1998).

remembered Nouwen describing a family situation reminiscent of Victorian times. Nouwen's father had been unable to express his feelings so Nouwen's mother had become the emotional heart of the family. The father's approval had been critical in the lives of Nouwen and his siblings. He confirms that Nouwen 'longed for his father's love: it was a deep wound in his life' (Bart Gavigan, 1998). His father had, in fact, longed for 'peer peers', people who would challenge him. The Gavigans concluded that Nouwen should have challenged his father and thereby won his approval but the psychological wounds made that difficult.

Nouwen's life decisions had served only to exacerbate matters. He had found himself in institutional contexts where he was told to deny, repress or ignore what he was thinking and feeling, the product of the Roman Catholic church 'at some of its worst times' in terms of education and a military understanding of the priesthood. Likewise, in universities, students did not expect their professors to have any problems. The more he continued this tradition of pretending not to have problems, the more rigid it was. Not only did he have deep issues with which to struggle but also a habit, more than fifty- years- old, of being told by institutions that it was either inappropriate or impossible for any of his personal issues to be worked with or admitted (Bart Gavigan, 1997).[68]

After many visits to England for counselling, Nouwen returned to Canada permanently. But the depression did not lift and he felt abandoned and devoid of faith. He lost his appetite for people and life. It is clear from Nouwen's writings that Ball's decision to withdraw from Nouwen's emotional demands 'created such an excruciating inner pain that it brought me to the edge of despair' (Nouwen, 1989b: 223). Nouwen terms this vocation as 'the second loneliness, a loneliness with Jesus in community'. It was a calling for which he was not prepared and one which was 'much, much harder to live than the loneliness resulting from physical or emotional isolation' (Nouwen, 1989b: 223).

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[68] Bart Gavigan points out that because Nouwen had a spiritual articulation and awareness of the issues the darkness was darker than many others might experience in such a situation. He was wrestling with a dark night of everything: of the spirit, at the point of faith, his own being, desires, longings and sexuality, his own calling, work and career as an author. But there were a number of lights: Nouwen's faithfulness to the Word in terms of saying the Office, celebrating the Eucharist and his writing: 'He could hardly get out of bed or drag himself out of the door but he could still somehow find the energy to write. He knew it was a salvation to him' (Bart Gavigan, 1998).

It seems reasonable to assume that Nouwen interpreted the failure of his relationship with Ball as an indication that God wanted him to live among handicapped people without the support of the friendship. It was 'dark agony' (Nouwen, 1989b, 225), a 'truly abysmal experience of being ripped apart from the inside out' (Nouwen, 1989b, 224). In his journal, Nouwen quotes Irish Murdoch who, in one novel, had written that it was the 'greatest pain and the greatest paradox of all that personal love has to break at some point, the ego has to break, something absolutely natural and seemingly good, seemingly perhaps the only good, has to be given up. After that there's darkness and silence and space. And God is there ... When you have nothing left you have nothing left but hope'.[69]

In his later writings Nouwen reiterates that his breakdown was triggered by 'the sudden interruption' of a friendship which

> had been able to touch me in a way I had never been touched before. Our friendship encouraged me to allow myself to be loved and cared for with greater trust and confidence. It was a totally new experience for me, and it brought immense joy and peace. It seemed as if a door of my interior life had been opened, a door that had remained locked during my youth and most of my adult life.
>
> But this deeply satisfying friendship became the road to my anguish, because soon I discovered that the enormous space that had been opened for me could not be filled by the one who had opened it. I became possessive, needy, and dependent, and when the friendship finally had to be interrupted, I fell apart. I felt abandoned, rejected, and betrayed. Indeed, the extremes touched each other (Nouwen, 1996c: xv).

The loving support of the community of L'Arche did not prevent him from experiencing himself as a 'useless, unloved, and despicable person' (Nouwen, 1996c: xiv). Despite the community's constant affirmation of him, he saw 'the endless depth of my human misery and felt that there was nothing worth living for' (Nouwen, 1996c: xiv) The crisis forced him to 'enter the basement of my soul and look directly at what was hidden there' (Nouwen, 1996c: xvii).

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[69] Iris Murdoch, *Henry and Cato.* London: Triad Grafton Books, 1987, p.348 (quoted in Nouwen, 1989b: 224).

Correspondence with Harank in May 1987 confirms the extent of Nouwen's despair. He feels 'very needy, lonely, depressed and grieving for the loss of my friendship with Nathan. I understand in my mind his need for distance, but my heart cannot accept it easily. In fact I keep waking up at night agonizing about unanswerable questions such as, "Why did this happen? What did I do wrong?" But I find much support from Jean Vanier with whom I have been completely open. It gives me some safe space to express my anguish. So don't worry about me. Just know that I miss you and wished [sic] I could cry a little with you and feel your presence'. A card sent to Harank from Nouwen visiting Vatican City reveals he was 'still experiencing much darkness and anguish. Sometimes it seems that there is no way out of the inner sense of rejection, self-doubt and being abandoned. I hope and pray that this crisis will lead me to a deeper faith and stronger faith in Jesus. Pray for me'.[70]

Ball now admits Nouwen was someone 'who loved me more deeply than I could receive' (in Porter, 2001: 91). He says Nouwen's love was far from perfect; his constellation of psycho-spiritual energies could make him a challenging person to relate to. He engaged Ball 'in a direct and unabashed manner with the whole of who he was' (in Porter, 2001: 91). Nouwen's passion for living a spiritual life, his desire to be faithful, his creative approach to suffering and his vision for spiritual friendship made a deep and lasting impression on him. But their friendship passed through a 'purifying suffering' before it manifested a more mutual and selfless commitment to the personal and spiritual development of the other. When the friendship broke down, Ball recalls, they entered into a long period of silence, 'unable to bear the expectations we had put upon each other ... It was an agonizing time which provoked serious questions within me' (in Porter, 2001: 98).

Therapy

Friends saw this period as a time for Nouwen to face his demons and bind his own wounds (Nouwen, 1997: 66). He had to leave Adam Arnett to others and accept his own disabilities. It was a struggle to believe in his belovedness. As he lived through the 'emotional ordeal', he realised he was becoming like Adam. 'He had nothing to

[70] Michael Harank gave permission for this postcard to be quoted in the thesis.

be proud of. Neither had I. He was completely empty. So was I. He needed full-time attention. So did I' (Nouwen, 1997: 67). Adam's way was that of radical vulnerability in the spirit of Jesus Christ, 'the least controlling and the most dependent guide' he had ever encountered (Nouwen, 1997: 69).

Between December 1987 and June 1988, Nouwen underwent therapeutic treatments at the *Homes for Growth* community in Winnipeg. Without the care of two guides assigned to him, he might 'easily have become bitter, resentful, depressed, and suicidal' (Nouwen, 1996c: xvii). One form of therapy involved being held physically. 'It responded to a craving within him to be held physically in a non-sexual way. The sessions took place fully clothed on a bed for comfort's sake, but in the context of an office. There, in the arms of a male therapist, in a primal state, Nouwen could be held very tightly and weep, scream, writhe and be caressed, all the things a parent does when holding an infant or small child. He was held unconditionally with an enormous amount of nurture and tenderness, which was for him very healing' (MacMillan, 1997).

It was Nouwen's first experience of psychotherapy. MacMillan confirmed that Nouwen told him he found the experience 'extraordinarily helpful, affirming and on some level therapeutic. It worked for him and responded to a craving within him. He began to understand better what had brought him to this crash period in his life and the relationship that had troubled him on entering was one that he could now more hopefully try to heal' (MacMillan, 1997).

In the early weeks of therapy, 'very old places of pain that had been hidden to me were opened up, and fearful experiences from my early years were brought to consciousness' (Nouwen, 1996c xvii). During this time, however, Nouwen did not lose his capacity to write. After each session of therapy he crafted a spiritual imperative to himself: 'I met him once at Winnipeg and it was clear that at certain moments he was in total confusion. But the notes he took showed a man of incredible perspicacity and wisdom, and a very deep spirituality' (Bart Gavigan, 1998).

The journal was not published for nine years but its entries, while carefully edited by friends, reveal nonetheless the depth of Nouwen's emotional trauma and mirror

much of the analysis of Bart and Patricia Gavigan. In many ways it is a mandate to live a more honest life. He notes, from the outset, that in the past he was dependent on others, notably his father, to give him a sense of identity: 'You have to let your father and father figures go. You must stop seeing yourself through their eyes and trying to make them proud of you' (Nouwen, 1996c: 5). His initial entries also suggest that he must accept that no one person can fulfil all his needs: 'You have to move gradually from crying outward – crying out for people who you think can fulfill your needs – to crying inward to the place where you can let yourself be held and carried by God' (Nouwen, 1996c: 7).

The journal indicates that, at times, Nouwen may well have been tempted to find emotional security in fleeting encounters: 'You feel overwhelmed by distractions, fantasies, the disturbing desire to throw yourself into the world of pleasure. But you know already that you will not find there an answer to your deepest question' (Nouwen, 1996c: 8). That question was clearly about discovering the nature of unconditional love: 'One day you will be free to give gratuitous love, a love that does not ask for anything in return. One day also you will be free to receive gratuitous love. Often love is offered to you, but you do not recognize it. You discard it because you are fixed on receiving it from the same person to whom you gave it (Nouwen, 1996c: 11).

Nouwen is writing these imperatives after sessions in which his body has been held; he, therefore, comes to trust his body more. For the first time, he writes about the body as a core part of his personality: 'You are beginning to realize that your body is given to you to affirm your self. Many spiritual writers speak about the body as if it cannot be trusted. This might be true if your body has not come home. But once you have brought your body home, once it is an integral part of your self, you can trust it and listen to its language ... A new spirituality is being born in you. Not body denying or body indulging but truly incarnational' (Nouwen, 1996c: 32). It is as though Nouwen is starting to believe that, in view of Ball's withdrawal, God does not intend him to have a physical relationship. So Nouwen projects this desire for human relationship and bodily intimacy onto Jesus. 'You are looking for ways to meet Jesus. You are trying to meet him not only in your mind but also in your body. You seek his affection, and you know that this affection involves his body as well as

yours. He became flesh for you so that you could encounter him in the flesh and receive his love in the flesh. But something remains in you that prevents this meeting. There is still a lot of shame and guilt stuck away in your body, blocking the presence of Jesus. You do not fully feel at home in your body; you look down on it as if it were not a good enough, beautiful enough, or pure enough place to meet Jesus' (Nouwen, 1996c: 40).

Nouwen's difficulties with intimacy seem to be mirrored in this new relationship with Jesus. The person of Jesus seems to replace the person of Ball, a divine transference of emotion and attraction. Yet, the second section of this particular imperative, dwells on Nouwen's regret that, for most of his life, he has depended on the permission of other people to be himself. It can be assumed with some confidence that Nouwen is thinking of becoming more open about his homosexuality when he considers that his life has been full of fears, especially fears of authority figures – parents, teachers, bishops, spiritual guides and friends: 'Think of Jesus. He was totally free before the authorities of his time ... You will not be able to meet Jesus in your body while your body remains full of doubts and fears' (Nouwen, 1996c: 40 and 41).

This desire for a closer relationship with Jesus, however, does not appear to remove the pain of Ball's decision to withdraw from their friendship: 'When you experience the deep pain of loneliness, it is understandable that your thoughts go out to the person who was able to take that loneliness away, even if only for a moment. When, underneath all the praise and acclaim, you feel a huge absence that makes everything look useless, your heart wants only one thing – to be with the person who once was able to dispel these frightful emotions. But it is the absence itself, the emptiness within you, that you have to be willing to experience, not the one who could temporarily take it away ... God does not want your loneliness; God wants to touch you in a way that permanently fulfills your deepest need' (Nouwen, 1996c: 47).

Throughout the journal Nouwen is at pains to become a more integrated person, to reunite his competing 'selves'. He writes that a part of himself was 'left behind very early in life' (Nouwen, 1996c: 49). As it is now known, through this research, that Nouwen repressed his homosexuality from the age of six, it is probable that this is

his interpretation of 'the part that never felt completely received', a part, Nouwen observes, which is still 'full of fears' (Nouwen, 1996c: 49). It is here, Nouwen notes, that Jesus resides: 'When you befriend your true self and discover that it is good and beautiful, you will see Jesus there. When you are most human, most yourself, weakest, there Jesus lives' (Nouwen, 1996c: 49). Nouwen states that if the vulnerable side of him is not welcomed by him, then it keeps its distance but deprives him of its true beauty and wisdom. In order for the fearful part to be received, Nouwen believes his 'grown-up self' has to develop child-like qualities of hospitality, gentleness and caring.

Nouwen then introduces the concept of the 'not yet'. It is not clear what he means by it. However, if we accept that Nouwen's discussions about his anxious self are a disguised reference to his homosexuality, then it seems fair to conclude that the 'not yet' is a veiled indication that he might one day openly acknowledge his gay identity. It can only happen, however, when this 'deepest, truest self' comes home: 'Since your intimate self does not feel safe with you, it continues to look for others, especially those who offer it some real, though temporary, consolation. But when you become more childlike, it will no longer feel the need to dwell elsewhere. It will begin to look to *you* as home' (Nouwen, 1996c: 50).

Nouwen notes that true love between two human beings puts him more in touch with his deepest self as rooted in God: 'God's love is all the love you need, and it reveals to you the love of God in the other. This is deep speaking to deep, a mutuality in the heart of God, who embraces both of you. Death or absence does not end or even diminish the love of God that brought you to the other person. It calls you to take a new step into the mystery of God's inexhaustible love' (Nouwen, 1996c: 64). Nouwen acknowledges that a desire for communion has been part of him since birth. He says that the pain of separation, which he experienced as a child and still experiences, reveals to him 'this deep hunger.' The desire, he believes, is not a symptom of neurosis but a sign of his vocation. He has to stop seeking gifts and favours 'like a petulant child' and trust that his deepest longing will be fulfilled (Nouwen, 1996c: 95). Not being welcome is his greatest fear. It connects with a birth fear of not being welcome in this life and a death fear of not being welcome in the life after: 'It is the deep-seated fear that it would have been better if you had not

lived' (Nouwen, 1996c: 101). This seems an extraordinary statement from a person acclaimed the world over by this stage for his spiritual writings. It even suggests that Nouwen's homosexual feelings appear to him as demonic forces: 'Are you going to give in to the forces of darkness that say you are not welcome in this life, or can you trust the voice of the One who came not to condemn you but to set you free from fear?' (Nouwen, 1996c: 101).

Towards the end of these reflections, Nouwen concludes that the great spiritual challenge is to live his wounds through instead of thinking them through. Healing will only emerge if the hurts in his mind are carried to his heart 'which is greater than your wounds' (Nouwen, 1996c: 110). It is important to note that, in discussing this transference, he uses the analogy of a child and his parents, indicating that the roots of his own pain are located in his early upbringing: 'Think of each wound as you would of a child who has been hurt by a friend. As long as that child is ranting and raving, trying to get back at the friend, one wound leads to another. But when the child can experience the consoling embrace of a parent, she or he can live through the pain, return to the friend, forgive, and build up a new relationship. Be gentle with yourself, and let your heart be your loving parent as you live your wounds through' (Nouwen, 1996c: 110).

But Nouwen never specified the sexual nature of his woundedness in his writing. He told one friend he could never bring himself to write the word 'gay' in his own private diary.[71] Harank comments that, when Nouwen went to L'Arche, he was forced to confront the contradictions and paradoxes of his life within a community which knew the meaning of brokenness, fragmentation and woundedness in incarnational ways: 'The dyke broke in terms of his trying to hold together pieces of his life which were being stretched. There was a total collapse of strength and energy except for his writing which was in some ways his saving grace. Writing was his blessing and it was his curse. It was a blessing because it was a way to deal with the darkness of his own life and share that with others in some very profound and abiding ways. But friends saw the gap between his living and the words of living. He did not convert himself. When he was open to receiving it, I think his friends served

[71] Disclosed to me by Maurice Monette, California, 1997.

as the people who reminded him and kept him humble about who he was and what he was trying to live. They pointed out that he needed to become accountable for his words' (Harank, 1997).

Harank considers Nouwen to have been 'the victim of a dualism which keeps secrets.' Because Nouwen was effectively imprisoned by the secret of being gay, it had a 'sometimes devastating' effect on himself and in his relationships with others: 'He had a tremendous fear of rejection in his life period because he wondered whether or not people would reject him or his writings if it were revealed that he was a gay man. I think this took an enormous physical, spiritual and emotional toll on his life (Harank, 1997).

Harank senses that, at times, Nouwen felt the absence of God's unconditional love for him. Nouwen was 'the apostle of anxiety and alienation' who knew well the landscape of such human emotions. Nouwen was unable to accept the unconditional love of God because he could not accept the unconditional human quality of who he was. Even when he eventually did, Harank discloses, Nouwen was plagued by the demons of self-doubt, guilt, secrecy as well as by the fear that this part of his unconditional humanity would not be accepted by his readers or even by God.[72]

The Return of the Prodigal Son

As I have shown, 'being welcomed' was an underlying concern for Nouwen throughout his life. In the years leading up to the breakdown he had been captivated by Rembrandt's 17th century painting, *The Parable of the Return of the Prodigal Son.*

[72] There are clear similarities between Nouwen's struggles and those of the Anglican priest and writer, the Revd Jim Cotter, who also experienced a breakdown in midlife. In the spirit of Nouwen, Cotter admits to liking to be in control: 'Because of my lack of a comfortable sense of being embodied, and because of a stigmatized sexuality, I have rarely had a clear and balanced sense of my own worth. Thus it has been a constant surprise to me to receive affirmation for what I do and am. Add to this an ability to weave magic with words, and nomadic work which rarely gives others an opportunity to see me behind the stage (or pulpit or altar), and I am set up for – and I set myself up for – admiration, pedestals, and isolation, none of which is good for me or for anyone else' (Cotter, *Brainsquall,* p. 6). Later in the book, Cotter notes: 'I *know* how prolific writers get their material. I am super aware of detail a hundred times more than usual. I *know* how closely psychosis is linked with creativity, why madness is never far from the creative writer. That knowledge was more than surface; it was gut knowledge, soul-deep. But it did not stop my falling into that terrifying place, for an awful, dreadful six months and a further very bleak year' (p.11).

During the crisis the only books he felt able to read were about that picture and the life of the artist. '...I found great consolation reading about the tormented life of the great Dutch painter and learning more about the agonizing journey that ultimately had enabled him to paint this magnificent work... One must have died many deaths and cried many tears to have painted a portrait of God in such humility' (Nouwen, 1994b: 21). Nouwen's own book on the painting, widely regarded as his spiritual masterpiece, emerged from his own period of torment and reflections written during his breakdown. Sub-titled 'A Story of Homecoming', it was regarded as a theological antidote for people who had known loneliness, dejection, jealousy and anger. [73] Written in the years after Nouwen's therapy as he began to pastor again at L'Arche, it charted Nouwen's own self-analysis as to whether or not his life bore the hallmarks of an elder son, a younger son or a father. The book is a study in intimacy and, while Nouwen distances himself from any references to homosexuality, it is important to remember it was written as he was beginning an eight-year process of trying to synchronise his priesthood with a sexual identity which was growing stronger. The return to his community, where he notes that the mentally handicapped unconditionally gave him loving embraces without asking questions, is accompanied by 'much inner struggle' and 'mental, emotional, and spiritual pain' (Nouwen, 1994b: 14).

The portrayal of the younger son being embraced by the father became 'a mysterious window through which I can step into the Kingdom of God' (Nouwen, 1994b: 15). Nouwen's intense response to the embrace suggested he was 'desperately searching for that inner place where I too could be held as safely as the young man in the painting' (Nouwen, 1994b: 17). Everything in him 'yearned to be received in the way the prodigal son was received'. (Nouwen, 1994b: 134). Through meditative reflections on the painting, he discerned a vocation 'to enter into the inner sanctuary of my own being where God has chosen to dwell' (Nouwen, 1994b: 18). But in

[73] A similar response to depression is found in the writings of the Anglican priest, Canon Gonville ffrench-Beytagh. He believes the 'only artists that seem to understand the expression of depression are some of the old masters, particularly Rembrandt, with his dark shadows' (ffrench-Beytagh, *Out of the Depths,* p. 3). Elsewhere he writes that he finds it 'comforting to look at dark Rembrandts with their sad, experienced faces and heavy shadows; and to repeat the words of David on the death of his son, "Oh, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! ... my son, my son!" It is partly the cadence which echoes the low rhythm of depression and partly that this is the cry of a man in agony. And without trying to be dramatic, depression is an agony and it makes it less lonely to know that others have shared the pain' (ffrench-Beytagh, *Facing Depression.* p. 7).

facing his own inner life of divine-human encounter, Nouwen had also to accept sexuality which was part of that same interiority.

According to Nouwen's own interpretation of his spiritual journey, the painting gradually enabled him to accept himself as 'the beloved of God' and to cast off his sense of fear. 'As the Beloved, I can confront, console, admonish, and encourage without fear of rejection or need for affirmation. As the Beloved, I can suffer persecution without desire for revenge and receive praise without using it as a proof of my goodness' (Nouwen, 1994b: 39). The freedom and security, which Nouwen clearly felt, gave him the confidence to confront his restless past: 'I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places searching for love! This is the great tragedy of my life and of the lives of so many I meet on my journey' (Nouwen, 1994b: 39). Love does not consist in proving to himself and others that, only through effort and hard work, is true love possible: 'I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire' (Nouwen, 1994b: 40).

At the time Nouwen was writing, he had restored his friendship with Ball, though not at such an emotionally intense level. As he discusses the impact of the painting, he alludes to the relationship with some ambiguity: 'A friendship that at first seemed promising and life-giving gradually pulled me farther and farther away from home until I finally found myself completely obsessed by it …As much as I realized how self-destructive my thoughts and actions were, I kept being drawn by my love-hungry heart to deceptive ways of gaining a sense of self-worth' (Nouwen, 1994b: 49). When the friendship broke down, Nouwen writes, he had to choose between 'destroying myself' or trusting that 'the love I was looking for did, in fact, exist … back home!' (Nouwen, 1994b: 50). He learned that 'no human being would ever be able to give me the love I craved, that no friendship, no intimate relationship, no community would ever be able to satisfy the deepest needs of my wayward heart' (Nouwen, 1994b: 50).

Nouwen reveals a feeling of envy he has towards the wayward son in the parable. It seems probable he is referring to his homosexual friends when he writes: 'It is the emotion that arises when I see my friends having a good time doing all sorts of

things that I condemn. I call their behavior reprehensible or even immoral, but at the same time I often wondered why I didn't have the nerve to do some of it or all of it myself' (Nouwen, 1994b: 70). It appears also that he finds his priesthood an onus: 'The obedient and dutiful life of which I am proud or for which I am praised feels, sometimes, like a burden that was laid on my shoulders and continues to oppress me, even when I have accepted it to such a degree that I cannot throw it off' (Nouwen, 1994b: 70). The painting also puts him in touch with his low self-esteem, a characteristic of many homosexuals. Nouwen reveals that the core of his own spiritual struggle is one against self-rejection, self- contempt and self-loathing: 'It is a very fierce battle because the world and its demons conspire to make me think about myself as worthless, useless, and negligible' (Nouwen, 1994b: 107).

As Nouwen completes his spiritual analysis of the painting, he concludes that, throughout his life, God has been an outsider, a figure who 'remained somewhat threatening and somewhat fearsome' (Nouwen, 1994b: 121). God's love for him had been limited by his fear of God's power, and 'it seemed wise to keep a careful distance even though the desire for closeness was immense'. (Nouwen, 1994b: 121). Rembrandt's depiction of a God in utmost vulnerability leads Nouwen to an awareness that his 'final vocation' is to become like the Father as pastor of the L'Arche community and 'live out his divine compassion in my daily life' (Nouwen, 1994b:121). In a rare criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, Nouwen wonders whether or not the church of the past had stressed obedience so strongly that it had made priests like him fearful of claiming their spiritual fatherhood which he defines as having 'nothing to do with power or control' but is a 'fatherhood of compassion' (Nouwen, 1994b: 127). 'Isn't there is a 'subtle pressure' in both the Church and society for people to remain dependent children?' (Nouwen, 1994b: 122). 'Who has truly challenged us to liberate ourselves from immature dependencies and to accept the burden of responsible adults?' (Nouwen, 1994b: 122). The path to a compassionate fatherhood, Nouwen argues, is through grief, forgiveness and generosity. The living out of it requires the radical discipline of 'being home' (Nouwen, 1994b: 133). 'As a self-rejecting person always in search of affirmation and affection, I find it impossible to love consistently without asking for something in return. But the discipline is precisely to give up wanting to accomplish this myself as a heroic feat' (Nouwen, 1994b: 133).

MacMillan says that, when Nouwen returned to the community, he had not 'figured it all out'. He did not fully understand the breakdown but had an openness to go forward. There was still vulnerability and the therapy, while helping with the emotional crisis, did not bring him to a place of enlightenment. The elements of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* corresponded to some of the struggles and passages of his own life. The image of the prodigal son being embraced by the father was a central image for what Nouwen aspired to as a place of belonging and a place to be loved (MacMillan, 1997).

Assessing Nouwen's return to Daybreak, Patricia Gavigan comments that community living requires accountability, stability, commitment and self -revelation. It also necessitates loving others in a practical rather than a theoretical way. Nouwen's move to L'Arche and his friendship with Ball had stimulated his own need to love and be loved but had resulted in the breaking down of the structures and patterns Nouwen had established to live his life well: 'There were many parts of his personality which were not in agreement with his decision to leave academia and therefore the process of breakdown, deterioration and darkness had been completely normal given who he was, what his life had been and the life choices he had made at every crucial stage (Patricia Gavigan, 1998).

Harank comments that Nouwen's innate sense of distraction prevented him from becoming available to others in community and emerged from his restlessness, part of which 'was very mysterious and part of which was very understandable'. Nouwen had never felt at home anywhere for any length of time: 'The numbers of people he felt responsible for became a sense of distraction rather than a sense of presence. He had a profound desperation of neediness to be loved and to love. For some people that can be a way to deepen the presence of God in their lives. For others, like Nouwen, it can become an endless cycle of distraction and busyness, trying to find the pearl of great price. I think it was very difficult for Nouwen at L'Arche to be among people who did not share his background in terms of wealth, privilege, words and verbal skills' (Harank, 1997).

A serious road accident in 1989 led to Nouwen's undergoing life-or-death surgery. During the post-operative care period, his father visited him and the difficult relationship, which had existed between them since childhood, changed. A close friend observed: 'Something very significant happened when his father talked with him in the hospital. It was to do with forgiveness. That was when he understood something in the prodigal son parable about becoming the father – the day he let his own father go free. He did it with a lot of consciousness and a lot of pain'.[74] Other friends who shared Nouwen's life at the time noted his capacity to minister to others while still enveloped by his own mental anguish.[75]

Ball says he will always think of Nouwen in terms of a suffering servant. His 'huge' heart, held within his vocation of priest, was constantly open to the suffering of others. His own personal suffering, often triggered by feelings of rejection, isolation or abandonment, was 'equally large'. His capacity to suffer was 'an expression of his unusual human capacity.' The ability to remain in the reality of suffering was at the heart of the matter (Ball in Porter, 2001: 98-99).

[74] The friend asked to be anonymous.

[75] Carolyn and Geoff Whitney-Brown, for example, recall an encounter with him shortly after the accident. They were talking in a restaurant: 'He was sitting there with his arms wrapped around his head and neck. He took off his glasses and mashed his face into different shapes, confiding earnestly, 'I get more handicapped all the time.' Then there was a moment when it all changed. He put on his glasses and leaned forward. His eyes were totally focused and alive. We had corresponded but had never met. He remembered every detail of our letters. We talked about our lives and he listened with absolute attention and deep insight. I remember the reverence and respect he had for us and our life choices. Then when we had finished, he took off his glasses, started squishing up his face again, rumpled his hair and wound his body all up in knots. This first meeting stayed in my mind as a paradigm of everything I would grow to know and love about Henri. He had an extraordinary pastoral gift to speak God's word to others. Even when he was wrapped up in such internal anguish, his generous spirit and his gift remained intact' (Carolyn Whitney-Brown, 1998).

5

THE BODY (1990-1996)

In the previous chapter, I showed how Nouwen's emotional struggles led to his breakdown which, in turn, enabled him to face the root causes of his depression. I argued that, as a result, he gradually became a more integrated individual. Out of his suffering emerged new books and a sense of inner healing, both in relationship to himself and to others. In this chapter I shall argue that Nouwen's recovery also marked a turning point in his self- acceptance as a gay man.

Just as Nouwen was starting to gain confidence in using the word 'gay', homosexuals began to adopt the adjective 'queer'. The new vocabulary soon made its way into theological discourse as lesbians and gay men 'claimed the ability and right to define and reflect on their own experience' (Stuart, 1997: 2). In the 1960s books about homosexuality by male homosexuals had started being published. As Christian feminism had gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian theologians argued that Christian theology had been rooted in patriarchy, racism and heterosexism – and would have to be reconstructed. In addition, lesbians and gay men had become united in their responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It was out of this context that queer theology developed in the 1990s.

Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and associated with queer philosophers and sociologists such as Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler and Jeffrey Weeks, Queer theory rejected the essentialist position that sexuality is a universal and eternal drive. Following a social constructionist view of sexuality, it argued that recognition of difference in solidarity is fundamental. Erotic desire does not exist above or beyond history or culture but is always interpreted within it. The interpretation, or construction, is often directly connected with issues of power – of those who categorise and label, and of those who are labelled: 'Social constructionism teaches us that nothing is 'natural', including heterosexuality. Some men and women may be attracted to each other in all times and cultures, but how the attraction is interpreted and the repercussions of it are constructed differently in different times and cultures. The same is equally true of gender' (Stuart, 1997: 3).

The notion of 'queer hermeneutics' also took on its own currency in certain theological circles. Goss had argued that lesbians and gay people were the victims of 'biblical terrorism': the Bible had been used as a weapon to justify discrimination and violence but the churches had often exerted pressure on biblical scholars, preventing them from asking appropriate hermeneutical questions to challenge the use of scripture against lesbian and gay people. Gay Christians were starting to use the Bible as a resource for themselves in their struggle against injustice:

> The lives of queer Christians become another text from which they interpret the biblical text. Queer Christians refigure the meaning of the text by interpreting and applying it to their lives. They realise that for change in ecclesial biblical discourse to take place, they must start to reject the traditional ecclesial constructions of the text. In fact, they reject all readings that either depoliticise or spiritualise the text. Their commitments to their queer identities, practices, and the struggle for justice become a framework for interpreting a particular biblical text (Goss, 1993: 103).

Although Nouwen's approach to spirituality was based largely on his own experience and frequent references to scripture, there is no evidence from his writings that he was influenced by queer theory during the 1990s. In fact, he seems to have shown little interest in the changing currents of theology at any time in his life. But he was aware that, in general, people's spiritual perceptions were changing. As LaNoue argues, the difference between North American spirituality in the 1980s and the 1990s was that the word self seemed to be replaced by the word soul (LaNoue, 2001: 9). Psychological language had become more metaphysical and indicated a spiritual hunger in society in counterpoint to career success and materialistic gain. LaNoue points out that members of the 'baby-boomer generation' of the 1950s were by now in advanced middle age. They had begun to re-examine their lives, reassess the meaning of love and face their spiritual voids. Nouwen, writing after the experience of breakdown and within a community of 'downwardly mobile' people, was a spiritual force in satiating this inner search for meaning. He continued to produce books every year and his popularity showed no signs of abating, even though he was conscious, even envious, that modern American 'soul-classics', such as M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled*, were in the New York Times' bestseller lists and on sale at airports.

Sexuality and Mysticism

In 1990, priests and members of the L'Arche community helped Nouwen to discern whether or not Daybreak was an appropriate long-term home for him. His mandate was subsequently renewed. Regaining his energy and vision, he transformed the spiritual life of the community.[76] Living and working with people, disabled in body and mind, connected Nouwen with his own handicaps. He often took gifts to some members of the community but was hurt when one of them once refused his generosity: 'I suddenly realised that he was touching me in the right place, in a very painful place, in that I had used the gifts to replace an intimacy with him that he really wanted. He wanted friendship. He wanted intimacy and here I was giving him gifts ... that helped me stay away from intimacy' (Nouwen, 1992 BBC). Here, again, Nouwen is skilful drawing a spiritual lesson out of both his insensitivity and oversensitivity to a situation.

According to one friend, Nouwen began to recognise more deeply at this time his need for affirmation and physical affection from other men. He was growing in his ability to own his homosexual orientation. But this created a conflict for him in that he started to question whether or not he could continue to live it as a fully celibate man: 'There were people around him who knew him well enough to know what his sexual orientation was and who refused to dismiss it as being unmentionable. It is very difficult to live in a community for any amount of time without divulging that part of your life. As a priest he was not expected to have a sexual life but even a

[76] Sister Sue Mosteller, C.S. J., a long-time assistant at L'Arche and Nouwen's literary executrix, recalls that when Nouwen joined Daybreak spirituality was on the edges of the community; when he died it was at the centre. He brought a sacramental presence to Daybreak which grew into 'a beautiful rhythm of worship' (Sue Mosteller, 1997). He pastored by listening and preaching: 'He had a very strong way of delivering the message of Jesus from his own knowledge, and somehow by his enthusiasm he was able to capture people's minds and hearts. You might not remember his words – but the Spirit was visible in what happened between him and individuals, or a group of people' (Lorenzo Sforza-Cesarini, 1998). Many admired Nouwen's change of direction but a hermit at the community recalled that others had criticised his move: 'When he went back to Cambridge to give a Lent talk, taking with him one of the core members, people walked out asking how this great intellect, this former professor, could say he was learning from a man who could not speak or walk. He received some hard letters and later said that if some people had had stones they would have thrown them at him' (Elizabeth Buckley, 1998).

celibate man responds sexually in his being. Nouwen could talk about that with certain people more candidly'.[77]

Yet publicly and in print Nouwen tended to avoid references to sexuality, even though he had built his reputation as a writer on intimacy. When I interviewed Nouwen in August 1992 – at a time when he would have been wrestling with these issues – I asked him about this avoidance. He responded by saying that the best means of writing about it remained elusive. In order to write well about sexuality, it had to be spoken about from the place of mysticism and not simply from the realm of morality. Moral discussions about sexuality are valid, said Nouwen, but he did not feel it was his vocation to talk about sexuality from that perspective:

> I have a very strong feeling that there's something to be said about sexuality, and about intimacy and sexuality, that has to come from a place of communion. The whole question of sexuality is also a question of communion – intercourse, communion, intimacy. It involves our bodies as well as our minds and our hearts. If we talk about sexuality from the place of communion, we have first to speak well about the depths of what communion is about - communion as that what our heart most desires - and from that place we start talking about sexuality and the sexual life.
>
> Every human being lives a sexual life, whether you're celibate, married or whatever. Sexual life is life. That sexual life has to be lived as a life that deepens the communion with God and with our fellow human beings. If it doesn't, then it can be harmful. I haven't found the right language for it yet but I hope I will one day' (Nouwen, BBC: 1992).

In the last four years of his life, however, Nouwen did begin to write a little less tentatively about sexuality. *Life of the Beloved* could be viewed as being as much a treatise on his own inner struggles with love and sexuality as it is about spiritual living in the secular world, a theme chosen for the sub-title. In the opening pages he describes his encounter with a Jewish journalist who had longed to be a novelist. It is

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[77] The community member who provided this insight requested anonymity. During these years Nouwen was still travelling the world as a preacher and sometimes gay people were in the audience. In 1991 he spoke at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, in the Irish Republic. A Catholic student who listened to him recollects talking with him afterwards: 'I told him I was a lesbian but I had a difficulty reconciling my faith and my sexuality. He just held my hands and with tears in his eyes said "That is a gift from God." His words had a profound effect on me. Here was a member of the clergy who understood me with a Christ-like compassion without judging me in a negative way' (Catriona Ryan, 2001).

apparent from his choice of words that he had been attracted to the young man. 'Looking at him, I experienced a deep sympathy – more than that I dare say – a deep love for this man. Beneath the sarcasm and the cynicism I sensed a beautiful heart, a heart that wanted to give, to create, to live a fruitful life' (Nouwen, 1993b: 11). Nouwen senses a connection between them and believes the meeting is ordained: 'Quite spontaneously I felt a strong desire rise up in me to liberate him from his imprisonment and to help him to discover how to fulfill his own deepest desires' (Nouwen, 1993b: 11). Nouwen then explains how he did not want the journalist to leave and how he encouraged him to give up his job, go to Yale for a year and write the novel. Nouwen would find the money. Many years later, Nouwen admits, the journalist had questioned Nouwen's motives at the time. The man went to Yale but he did not write the novel; instead he became a close friend of Nouwen. What is significant is that, as Nouwen writes the book, his undeniable attraction to the journalist is uppermost in his mind and forms the introduction to his latest spiritual thinking. He writes the book as though it were a letter addressed to the journalist: 'Beneath all my seemingly strong self-confidence there remained the question: "If all those who shower me with so much attention could see me and know me in my innermost self, would they still love me?" That agonizing question, rooted in my inner shadow, kept persecuting me and made me run away from the very place where that quiet voice calling me the beloved could be heard' (Nouwen, 1993b: 29). It is possible that, in print at least, Nouwen was articulating his feelings of love for men such as Nathan Ball as being an escape from the love of God.

According to Nouwen, becoming the beloved of God involves the four eucharistic steps of being taken, blessed, broken, and given, as with the consecrated bread of holy communion. Nouwen observes that brokenness is often most 'painfully experienced' with respect to sexuality. Befriending the brokenness does not make it less painful, argues Nouwen. Living with mentally handicapped people makes him increasingly aware that personal wounds are part of the fabric of human life: 'My own and my friends' struggles make it clear how central our sexuality is to the way we think and feel about ourselves. Our sexuality reveals to us our enormous yearning for communion. The desires of our body – to be touched embraced and safely held – belong to the deepest longings of the heart and are very concrete signs of our search for oneness' (Nouwen, 1993b: 73).

Nouwen explains that it is through the search for communion that people experience anguish. Society, he says, has become so fragmented, family lives sundered by physical and emotional distance, friendships sporadic and intimacies utilitarian that there are few places of true safety: 'I notice in myself how often my body is tense, how I usually keep my guard up and how seldom I have a complete feeling of being at home' (Nouwen, 1993b: 73). When the commercial environment overstimulates, overextends and sometimes seduces the senses, it is no wonder, Nouwen notes, that people are plagued by crazy fantasies, wild dreams and disturbing feelings: 'It is where we are most needy and vulnerable that we most experience our brokenness. The fragmentation and commercialization of our milieu makes it nearly impossible to find a place where our whole being - body, mind and heart - can feel safe and protected' (Nouwen, 1993b: 74).

The failure in his relationship with Ball, however, is clearly never far from Nouwen's heart. But by writing about it, Nouwen is able to draw out a spiritual significance from his pain. Where once he talked about rejection, he now makes references to dependency, a sign of his own emotional growth. This is another example of how Nouwen examines his own emotions and communicates their spiritual implications to a wider audience. It is also possible to read such accounts as examples of displaced intimacy: the reader takes on the role of a close friend or even confessor: 'I vividly remember how I had, at one time, become totally dependent on the affection and friendship of one person. This dependency threw me into a pit of great anguish and brought me to the verge of a very self-destructive depression. But from the moment I was helped to experience my interpersonal addiction as an expression of a need for total surrender to a loving God who would fulfill the deepest desires of my heart, I started to live my dependency in a radically new way. Instead of living it in shame and embarrassment, I was able to live it as an urgent invitation to claim God's unconditional love for myself, a love I can depend on without any fear' (Nouwen, 1993b: 80-81).

Nouwen and AIDS

The HIV/AIDS epidemic had been first reported in June 1981. In 1983 the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) had been discovered to be the causative agent of AIDS. The year 1985 had seen the licensing of an antibody test to diagnose the presence of HIV infection and in 1987 the licensing of AZT created the first specific anti-HIV therapy. That same year, the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) Administrative Board had published *The Many Faces of AIDS: A Gospel Response.* This casuistic reaction opposed the promotion or advocacy of condoms, but argued that, when faced with a person who could further spread the disease and whose conduct would not be altered, the principle of toleration should be invoked and the patient be allowed to use a condom to prevent the spread of the disease (Keenan, 2000: 22). This, in turn, had created a stern warning from other bishops that Catholic teaching was being undermined or made confusing. Despite a consensus of moral theologians offering traditional research for a casuistry protecting long-standing teaching while accommodating the value of protecting those at risk from the virus, the American bishops feared they could still cause confusion. In 1989, they wrote a further letter on AIDS, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* This avoided addressing infected persons who did not abstain from sexual activity and raised questions about the effectiveness of condoms. It was against this ecclesiastical background that Nouwen began to write tentatively about AIDS:

> The AIDS epidemic is probably one of the most telling symptoms of our contemporary brokenness. There love and death cling to each other in a violent embrace. Young people, desperate to find intimacy and communion, risk their very lives for it. It seems that there is a cry reverberating through the large empty spaces of our society: It is better to die than to live in constant loneliness.
>
> Seeing AIDS patients die and seeing the spontaneous generosity with which their friends form community to support them with affection and material and spiritual help, I often wonder if this horrendous illness is not a clear summons to conversion directed to a world doomed by competition, rivalry and ever-increasing isolation. Yes, the AIDS crisis demands a wholly new look at our human brokenness (Nouwen, 1993b: 74-75).

Unlike conservative evangelicals who believed AIDS to be a plague sent by God to punish practising homosexuals, Nouwen saw the pandemic as competitive society's

wake-up call to the loneliness it had created. The spiritual call of the beloved was to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of a curse and place it under the light of a blessing which could radically transform the physical, mental or emotional pain which AIDS had brought: 'What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seems a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to a deeper communion' (Nouwen, 1993b: 79). Suffering can then be befriended and experienced as 'an opening towards the full acceptance of ourselves as the Beloved' (Nouwen, 1993b: 80).

One of Nouwen's homosexual friends explained that, as the AIDS crisis became more central in the lives of many people, Nouwen became exposed to a new spiritual life opening up in North America primarily for gay men and their caretakers. 'There was life there that was not found in most neighbourhood churches. People were living on death row and were able to reach out and take risks which they might not otherwise have done. It was a case of being alive with a limited time in front of them. That broke open something quite big for Nouwen'. [78]

Nouwen's book, *With Burning Hearts* (1994), a meditation on the eucharistic life, was dedicated to Michael Harank and all living and working at Bethany House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker house in Oakland, California. It cared for homeless people living with AIDS. In the book. Nouwen continued his thinking on intimacy and communion: 'God desires communion: a unity that is vital and alive, an intimacy that comes from both sides, a bond that is truly mutual. Nothing forced or "willed," but a communion freely offered and received ...It is this intense desire of God to enter into the most intimate relationship with us that forms the core of the Eucharistic celebration and the Eucharistic life' (Nouwen, 1994d: 69-70). Communion is the deepest cry 'of God's heart and our heart, because we are made with a heart that can be satisfied only by the one who made it' (Nouwen, 1994d: 71). As Nouwen begins to feel more comfortable with his own body and the broken body of others, so too he stresses the bodiliness of God, connecting the Incarnation with the Eucharist: ' Bread and wine *become* his body and blood in the giving. The bread, indeed, is his body

[78] The friend asked not to be named.

given for us; the wine his blood poured out for us. As God becomes fully present for us in Jesus, so Jesus becomes fully present to us in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist' (Nouwen, 1994d: 68).

Harank argues that the epidemic provided Nouwen with a way to connect him with his sexuality and his compassion. He gave annual talks to raise funds for the house which does not receive any government funding. While Nouwen found it difficult sometimes to stay by the bedside of a dying person, those to whom he ministered were comforted and upheld by the blessings he gave them.

Colby points out that Nouwen understood the mystical unity of God in such circumstances because to be with a dying person was for him 'a fully erotic and sexual experience, holding a man in his arms, tenderly caressing him without any agenda' (Colby 1998). He ministered with a generosity of spirit but at the same time it was a fully embodied experience with another person. Yet Nouwen could never place himself in the role of a lover. He was the father or pastor: 'He did not feel that intimate phase of being a lover was open to him. I think that was a tragedy' (Colby, 1998).

Another book of Nouwen's, *Our Greatest Gift*, published the same year, was a meditation on dying and caring. It was stimulated by a conversation with Ball who had asked him where and how he had wanted to die. Nouwen argues that, while people tend to think of death as an irreversible separation, the ending of precious relationships and the beginning of loneliness, the death of Jesus opens the possibility of its being a way to union and communion. Throughout the book, there are references to people living with AIDS and the need to care for them. Nouwen has read *Borrowed Time*, Paul Monette's 'deeply moving' account of his friend George Horowitz's battle against AIDS. Nouwen points out that, after Horowitz's death, Monette is left alone. 'Are we, finally, all losers?' Nouwen asks. He acknowledges his 'deep admiration' for the couple but is persuaded that love is stronger than death. Nouwen describes his own experience of visiting a man dying of AIDS in Oakland: 'I wanted to say something to him that Paul hadn't been able to say to George. In Paul's experience, the churches had nothing significant to say to people with AIDS ... But when I held Rick's hand and looked into his fear-filled eyes, I felt deeply that

the short time he had still to live could be more than a brave, but losing battle for survival. I wanted him to know and believe that the meaning of the time left lay, not in what he could still do, but in the fruits he could bear when there was nothing left to do' (Nouwen, 1994c: 59-60). Nouwen admits that when he thinks of young people dying of AIDS, 'everything in me rises up in protest' (Nouwen, 1994c: 60). But he knows it is a temptation to think of them fighting a losing battle. With all the faith he can muster, he believes that their deaths will be fruitful and that 'they are indeed called to be the parents of generations to come' (Nouwen, 1994c: 60).

Nouwen also draws his readers' attention to a crucifix he has seen in San Francisco. It depicts Christ dying of AIDS: 'There too, all men, women and children of the world with AIDS were portrayed, not to frighten, but to offer hope. This AIDS cross is a cross for the dying people of our century to look up and find hope' (Nouwen, 1994c: 90-91). The caring of homosexuals for one another has also impressed Nouwen. He has learned of young people in cities across North America living their illness in solidarity with each other: 'They may seldom think or talk about this solidarity as an expression of God's solidarity with us, but whether they think or talk in this way or not, they do help each other to die in the same spirit in which Jesus died, the spirit of communion with the larger human family' (Nouwen, 1994c: 91).

In 1994 the Catholic Church published a new catechism which reiterated that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered' but at the same time condemned 'unjust discrimination' against homosexuals whom it stressed 'must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity'. (quoted by Dillon, 2000: 59). That same year, Nouwen spent a week with the National Catholic Aids Network conference in Chicago, becoming a leading spokesperson for the influential organisation, not only for Catholics but for many people of faith involved in AIDS ministry. Through this work he became exposed to even more gay people. In a speech, *Our Story, Our Wisdom*, Nouwen admits that being at the conference as one of America's leading spiritual guides is neither comfortable nor easy because 'I don't know what it will do for me' (Nouwen, *Our Story* p.21). He describes the pandemic as neither God's curse nor God's grace but 'a time of opportunity, a privileged time' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p.21). The way people chose to live the reality around them would determine whether the pandemic revealed God as a revengeful God or a healing lover.

An examination of the text is helpful for this analysis in that it reveals Nouwen wrestling publicly for the first time about the issue of homosexuality. In front of an audience of largely gay people, Nouwen is unable to hide completely behind his words. The sense of community at the conference strikes him as a powerful reality: 'Sometimes it takes a few days or seeks to get into community, but it took about ten minutes here. Somebody said to me "Aren't they hugging a little too fast?" I answered, "No, no, they haven't been hugged in a long time, they're catching up"' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p. 22). Community, he states, always moves from exclusiveness to inclusiveness: 'The pandemic brings us together. Client or helper, male or female, young or old, married or celibate, white or person of color, homosexual or heterosexual – all the distinctions that seemed so important – suddenly the pandemic throws all those differences away' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p.22). But while people felt they all belong to the same family, detects Nouwen, the great mystery is that in community is found a new loneliness which, in turn, creates a new intimacy:

> Paradoxically, if I'm well embraced, well held, well kept by my friends, then suddenly, by the very intimacy of that embrace, I know that I am alone in a very deep way, in a loneliness that I didn't know before. Precisely the love and intimacy of the other reveal my deepest loneliness, which I couldn't get in touch with before I entered into community. I feel that I've seen that here. In this wonderful freedom to hold, to touch and to be close, we also realize how deeply alone we are and should be, alone for God (Nouwen, *Our Story*, pp.22-23)

At one level this is certainly a strange statement, suggesting that Nouwen does not have a realistic understanding of gay relationships. As with his spiritual writing, Nouwen is probably using 'we' where he means 'I'. It is Nouwen himself who senses how alone he is and how that aloneness ought to be transferred to God. This would not be considered a healthy spirituality of human relationships for the gay community but it seems Nouwen is reasoning this way in order to make a profound theological point: 'Long before we were born, we had already been seen, loved, and held safe. Long before we could say to each other, "I need you, hold me, touch me, heal me, care for me," there had already been a voice that said, "You are my beloved daughter, my beloved son, and on you my favour rests." We are here to say that to

one another. Out of that reality we form community' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p. 23). Nouwen's argument is that the intimacy being so freely expressed among members of the conference and the collective aloneness that is part of that is rooted in a transcendent sense of belonging –'the incredible beauty of being together in God' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p.23).

Nouwen then introduces a theology of the body – 'sort of scary thing for me to talk about' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p.23). The conference teaches him that the body is not mere metaphor but a place of being which he is increasingly afraid to live as a reality. He acknowledges that he has to discover what it means 'to be a body, to be in the body, to be incarnate ... at home in myself, a temple of the Spirit, and therefore fully intimate with God, at home in my home where God dwells' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p.23). Nouwen has become aware of 'the incredible beauty' of the body: 'This whole pandemic has asked us to look into the innermost and most intimate places of our bodies, all the way into the cell structures, and really see this incredible, mysterious work of God' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, pp. 23-24). Nouwen declares that the conference Eucharist made him re-evaluate the word 'transubstantiation' because he understands that 'the very substance of our being was being transformed, and that the substance of who we are was giving new life to a body that could hardly contain its feelings of expansion, strength and vitality' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, pp.24-25).

The conference inspires Nouwen towards a new vision for the church as powerful, he says, as the Franciscan movement of the 13th century. A new church is being born from the cross under which members are standing. Dying people are bringing new life to the Church. Francis went to Pope Innocent III because he did not want to divide the church. Nouwen urges the assembly to keep connecting their movement with the Church: 'You'd better be sure that what we have lived in the body is there to be proclaimed, That's what it's about, that we have lived something in our bodies, felt it, experienced newness in ourselves. Then we have to make it Word, so that it can give life – even out of our death ... One of the things I hope for from this conference is that we stop blaming anyone, but really go and care, care for the leaders who are so very lonely, frightened and paralyzed' (Nouwen, *Our Story*, p.26).

In 1995, Nouwen was invited back to the conference, choosing as his theme *Befriending Death*. He discloses that the previous year's experience 'really touched me very, very deeply. Something happened to me that did not happen at other conferences, something quite unique' (Nouwen, *Befriending Death*, p.2). Nouwen seems more confident in talking about gay partners. He describes a visit to an AIDS patient, Peter, a school chaplain who had dedicated his life to spirituality and religion: 'His lover, a beautiful man, was saying, "We are going to fight this! Peter is not going to die. We're going to win this battle, and we won't let death get the better of us." I really admired him. He spoke as the warrior who looked death in the face' (Nouwen, *Befriending Death*, p.3). Peter's anger at God and sense of abandonment 'was the voice of resistance, of the protester'. (Nouwen, *Befriending Death*, p.3) Nouwen was concerned for the couple to embrace the truth of their reality and to embrace the enemy, death. Embracing death, Nouwen concludes, enables gay people to embrace their existential reality – a major development in his thinking a year before his own death:

> ... the HIV/AIDS epidemic for us people of faith or who want to be, who try to be people of faith, for us this is the call to claiming the truth of who we are. Precisely as we confront death in all its faces, we can finally say, "I love you because in loving you I find the truth of who I am, and as I find the truth of who I am, I can love you better' (Nouwen, *Befriending Death*, p.7).

These were not mere words for Nouwen. A few months later he preached at Peter's funeral in front of a congregation of schoolchildren. 'He made sure that Peter's partner, a Jew, sat in the front row with the bereaved parents. Nouwen affirmed that the funeral was for everyone who was grieving. During the homily he went up to each group – first to Peter's parents mourning the loss of a son; then he went right over to the partner and said in front of the whole student body that this was the person who had shared Peter's life most intimately. The local bishop never challenged him over that – though I have the feeling he would have liked to'.[79] This clearly indicates that, towards the end of his life, Nouwen was becoming more relaxed about his own sexual identity and more frustrated with church teaching. A friend comments: 'During the last two years of his life Nouwen was able to enter at least one friendship in a way that was much more body-centred than any ever had

[79] The friend requested anonymity.

been in his life. This was something very new for him, very affirming, something he wanted to explore and was very glad for. It remained a conflict for him about how he would be able to embrace a bodily affirmation of his sexuality, even a non-orgasmic one, not one that was so intent on the physical acts of intercourse but to be held in a very loving way, how he could continue to receive that as a person vowed to celibacy. My own sharing with him would lead me to believe that he remained convinced that his life was destined to be primarily a solitary path where there would be gay friends but where his priesthood would remain central'. [80]

Colby discloses that Nouwen shared with him his 'utter anguish' over his understanding sexuality as a mystical experience which pointed to the full unity with the Godhead. It was the raison-d'être of his spiritual life. As Nouwen began wrestling with what 'being gay' might mean for him, he grappled with it using the language of mystery. AIDS put him in front of the fact that gayness was not just about genital sexual experience. It was about coming to the mystical union of God with a different language. All of a sudden 'it was like scales popping off of his eyes and he realised this was the language of his own experience' (Colby, 1998).

The Flying Trapeze

During the 1990s, Nouwen developed a new theological understanding of the body through his association with a South African flying trapeze troupe, *The Flying Rodleighs*, with whom he spent many weeks on tour in Europe. It was a significant relationship, for not only did it provide Nouwen with original spiritual insights, it managed to connect him with his own sexual identity. The trapeze act was not just a piece of showmanship but a picture of life. 'I wanted to grab it from the inside' (Nouwen, *Angels*). The troupe leader, Rodleigh Stevens had told Nouwen, that people thought the star of the trapeze was the flyer. But the real hero was the catcher. Nouwen saw divine significance in his explanation:

> I can only fly freely when I know there is a catcher to catch me, that when I come back from my trip there is somebody to grab me – that's what life is all

[80] This friend also asked not to be identified.

> about. We like to take risks, we like to be free in the air in life, but we have to know there's a catcher. We have to know that when we come down from it all we're going to be caught and we're going to be safe. The great hero is the least visible. We have to trust the catcher (Nouwen, *Angels*).

Just as people with severe mental and physical handicaps, those with weak bodies, could create community without even speaking, so people with strong bodies could also create a sense of belonging and friendship among themselves and with the audience: 'They create something that the world so badly needs. Who doesn't desire friendship? Who doesn't desire belonging? Who doesn't desire to laugh? Who doesn't desire to be free? Who doesn't need discipline? Who doesn't need a sense of togetherness? It's all there in one act – what life is all about, what the world is all about' (Nouwen, *Angels*).

For Nouwen, the combined experiences of L'Arche and the flying trapeze summarised the truth of theology. The handicapped became the teachers of the heart. While they could not speak or explain, they told him that *being* was more important than *doing*, the heart more important than the mind, community preferable to loneliness, more important than doing things alone. Through the trapeze 'I discovered the incredible message that the body can give. The body tells a spiritual story. The body is not just body. It's an expression of the spirit of the human person and the real spiritual life is enfleshed life. That's why I believe in the Incarnation – that God becomes flesh. God enters into the flesh, into the body so if you touch your body, in a way you touch the divine life. There is no divine life outside the body because God decided to dress himself in a body, to become body' (Nouwen, *Angels*).

Through the act Nouwen also discerned a theology of being 'totally present to the present' which created a glimpse of eternity. The trapeze performance became the symbol for the concentrated, meditative life: 'The spiritual life is to be in the middle of a very violent, dark, complicated world, to be able to be there for a moment, totally with God. To be totally present. Praying is to be with God for a moment and for a second being able to let go of other things and to trust that you're safe there. Life is difficult but finally you are safe and finally you can do something together that is beautiful. So in a way some of my deepest spiritual questions become visible in what they were living and doing' (Nouwen, *Angels*).

The freedom Nouwen discovered through his time with *The Flying Rodleighs* was noted by Stevens: 'I saw in the lines of his face that he had spent many hours frowning or being very deep in thought but I did not know that he was a depressed or depressive person. The fact that he had hidden that side of his life means that he did it very well. He did not show us any depression at all. We hugged him every time he arrived and we hugged him before he left. We made him feel loved. We made him feel wanted and I suppose needed. It wasn't an act on our part. It was genuine. The troupe also allowed him to experience the act of flying by placing him in a harness. He wanted to hang underneath the catcher. He wanted the feeling of being gripped and held by somebody' (Stevens, 1997).

Gay Friendships

During this period Nouwen sought the counsel and support of Maurice Monette, a former Catholic priest, and his partner Jeff Jackson. They discussed with Nouwen whether his proposed book on the flying trapeze would be a 'coming out' book in that the circus act had put him in touch with the body's beauty and not its shame: 'He was immersed in the trapeze and in the bodies of the men. He would say the women had wonderful bodies also but he would go on and on and on about the men's bodies. For him, the circus was about letting go and taking risks. The artistes' bodies, as well as their hearts and their minds, were allowing them to take those risks' (Jackson, 1997).

Trapeze theology, however, opened Nouwen up to the possibility of letting go of the priesthood and his fame as a spiritual guide because it connected him powerfully with his sexuality. Monette and Jackson confirm that, because Nouwen was such a public figure, he was also a lonely person who could not find the intimacy for which he longed. Nouwen asked Monette to join him for a showing of the film, *Maurice,* based on E. M. Forster's novel about homosexuality between the classes of English society in the early 20th century: 'He felt shy about going himself and I think he knew the emotional impact it would give him. After the movie we drove back to L'Arche and he had to stop on the highway because he was crying. He was crying enormous tears. He was just terrified. His whole body was shaking. He was so caught

up with the story and with the dilemma that the two main characters were living with because it was his. All I could do was hold him and let him cry. He was really in pieces' (Monette, 1997).

Nouwen appears to have acted with integrity and responsibility during this time. He did not live a secret life in the gay underworld but 'glowed like a little baby' when he talked about someone he was in love with. To Monette and Jackson, it seemed as if, for the first time in his life, he was in touch with his body and with is heart – 'and his mind was blown'. The experience was 'too real' to write about.

Monette believes that Nouwen had never lived very much in his own body. He was not really grounded, especially in his sexuality. He went into flights of mysticism but his 'spiritual aeroplane never touched ground in the area of body and sexuality' because he was so terrified. It was not a question of scandal or shame but one about a choice that he was being invited to make 'by grace at this time of his life'. He had 'laughed hysterically' about the pain of the choices at times when he was explaining the joy of being with someone else and then had gone back into the idea of not really being able to fully be with that person:

> I think he related to a lot of people's pains, everything from the mundane decisions of a daily life to the very complicated parts of life and death. But he himself said his greatest struggle and his greatest gift in life was celebrating and struggling with his gay identity. It was about his issues of love and liberation and freedom as a gay man. It gave him an energy but his writing was painful. He did not only write about pain but expressed to us how painful it was to write when he could not add a final sentence about writing from a gay perspective in most of his paragraphs (Monette, 1997).

This, then, is direct evidence that the spirituality of Nouwen's books emanated from the context of his being a gay man. It also underlines Nouwen's fear of revealing to his readers that his reflections on psychological pain were, in fact, generated by his own struggle with his homosexuality. But Monette confirms Nouwen's sexual identity was central to the way he personally set about his writings. He also explains why Nouwen's work in the HIV/AIDS field was cautious: 'He did mention homosexuality but what he said in public was nowhere near what he really felt about those issues in private. He spoke of himself as being gay, of being homosexual, of

having that orientation. I considered him extraordinarily loving, extraordinarily holy, extraordinarily giving and extraordinarily gay' (Monette, 1997).

Monette and Jackson point out that they presented Nouwen with a number of choices: he could remain a celibate priest but 'come out' as a gay man; he could leave the priesthood and be open to a loving non-celibate relationship; or he could remain a publicly closeted gay priest and be open to developing a relationship. Nouwen never made a decision. 'The larger weight of society, priesthood and the persona were such that he could not move on the options, even though he could see them clearly. He understood that we were trying to present choices of integrity. He struggled when he thought of his responsibilities to his readers but I think he respected our challenges and our love for him. It was a time of confusion, inner pain and joy' (Jackson, 1997). Nouwen told another gay friend: 'If I came out I would be labelled as just another gay priest writing from sexuality and not my spirituality'. [81]

Nouwen, then, clearly lived uncomfortably with a dual identity, gravitating towards places where he could be alone with gay friends. Kevin Dwyer and Alvaro Carrasco, who run a retreat centre in Oakland, California, observed Nouwen's need of seclusion and his inability to be alone: 'He asked us not to tell anyone he was here, then he would walk around the property, introduce himself to other guests and would blow his own cover. He asked for privacy so that he could be left alone and not mobbed, but he just could not stay away from meeting people, sharing with them who he was and getting to know who they were (Dwyer, 1997). The difficulty, therefore, of concealing his homosexuality must have been intense. On the one hand, he would have been fearful of the public reaction and the condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church. On the other, his tendency towards openness with others and affability would have tempted him towards disclosure. It was good to have people in his life who did not see him as a famous writer but accept him as he was: 'It was clear he was hungry for a friendship in which we could both be ourselves. When he hugged me, I knew I was being hugged by somebody who really wanted communion with another human being' (Dwyer, 1997).

[81] The friend does not wish his identity to be disclosed.

Another gay Roman Catholic couple who offered Nouwen their home as a sanctuary – 'a safe haven where he could just be himself with us' - said Nouwen recognised their own relationship as life-giving. David Martin and Joseph Stellpflug commented: 'When our relationship was formalised at a Metropolitan Community Church ceremony, he sent us a van Gogh print with an incredibly beautiful letter on it in which he affirmed that we were making a very solemn and holy commitment' (Martin, 1998). Nouwen visited the couple once a month from 1994 until his death. Stellpflug said Nouwen needed to let down his guard: 'He was so afraid that if he was outed or came out himself, it would affect his work and the number of people who would read him. He really felt that in his professional writing he was touching liberals, conservatives Catholics, non-Catholics and he didn't want to jeopardise that' (Stellpflug, 1997).

Colby argues that other priests of Nouwen's generation, who discovered themselves to be gay, either became more institutionalised within the church or left the priesthood and entered into gay culture. Realising that neither option would be in line with his personality, Nouwen 'worked in what he called a gap, consistently hoping he could turn the gap into a bridge that people would walk over (Colby, 1998). Colby's point is that Nouwen's public ambivalence about his sexuality was vague enough not to undermine his priesthood and implicit enough to encourage gay people to locate their spirituality in his writings. Colby indicates Nouwen was aware that if he came out it would be from the religious right. The scandal for him would have been losing his ability to speak to spiritual seekers: 'He knew he had a large following among the religious right, the conservative movement, and a large following on the left. He rejoiced in that and enjoyed the paradox of it but he also had a sense that his greyness allowed him to slip under people's ideological radars and hit the heart' (Colby, 1998).

The Final Year

In September 1995, Nouwen took a sabbatical from L'Arche and wrote a number of books which, while focusing on various dimensions of spirituality, provided himself with a literary device through which to evaluate his vocation. These texts have the sense of being final discourses, even though Nouwen does not believe his own death

was close.[82] It is also apparent that, while still unmentionable from a personal viewpoint, homosexuality is preoccupying him and he is aware of his own secrets, so much so that he refers to them as such in his writings.

Can You Drink the Cup? written during that autumn, is a meditation on the sorrows and joys of life. But in the light of what I have discovered about Nouwen's homosexuality and the guarded references to his struggles in his later writings, it is legitimate also to view the book as a reflection on the nature of his own vocation, sexual-identity and growing ease with his own body. In a passage on the unique and lonely nature of his own life – 'I am alone, because I am unique' (Nouwen, 1996b: 28) – he is reminded of a sculpture of Pumunangwet by Philip Sears:[83]

> He stands with his beautifully stretched naked body, girded with a loincloth, reaching to the heavens with his bow high above him in his left hand while his right hand still holds the memory of the arrow that just left for the stars. He is totally self-possessed, solidly rooted on the earth, and totally free to aim far beyond himself. He knows who he is. He is proud to be a lonesome warrior called to fulfill a sacred task. He truly holds his own (Nouwen, 1996b: 28-29).

Nouwen, more confident about his sexuality as a result of his friendships with gay people and more reconciled to his own body as a result of his AIDS work and theology of the flying trapeze, seems almost to regard the sculpture as a vision of someone he would like to be: a man with an attractive body, a person secure enough in himself to take the risk of becoming a more liberated person, yet someone still divinely called. This could suggest Nouwen considered whether being open to a homosexual partnership would be in line with God's vocation for him.

But the text also reveals a person still struggling with inner darkness which he knows will accompany him to death: 'But now I know that my sorrows are mine and will not leave me ...The adolescent struggle to find someone to love me is still there; unfulfilled needs for affirmation as a young adult remain alive in me ... I experience deep sorrow that I have not become who I wanted to be, and that the God to whom I

[82] Nathan Ball stressed that, although they had talked about death during that year, Nouwen had no sense that his time was nearing.

[83] The sculpture of the Native American is at the Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts.

have prayed so much has not given me what I have most desired' (Nouwen, 1996b: 33-34).

After a lifetime of outward success and acclamation, Nouwen is clearly not sated. Love has eluded him, yet my research reveals that many people offered him love and affirmation. But the physical love Nouwen most desires – embodied in the person of Nathan Ball – has been denied him. This wound of love is transparent to the community of L'Arche: 'Calling myself a priest today radically challenges me to let go of every distance, every little pedestal, every ivory tower, and just to connect my own vulnerability with the vulnerability of those I live with' (Nouwen, 1996b: 45). Nouwen sees Jesus on the Cross as having 'a beautiful, luminous body with sacred wounds' (Nouwen, 1996b: 47).

Nouwen also addresses the secret side of his life in words which must surely indicate how he felt at times about his own homosexual orientation, especially with regard to the reaction of others were they to know the truth. He displays the characteristic anxiety of a gay person on the point of 'coming out':

> So often we are inclined to keep our lives hidden. Shame and guilt prevent us from letting others know what we are living. We think: "If my family and friends knew the dark cravings of my heart and my strange mental wanderings, they would push me away and exclude me from their company." But the opposite is true. When we dare to lift our cup and let our friends know what is in it, they will be encouraged to lift their cups and share with us their own anxiously hidden secrets (Nouwen, 1996b: 59).

Nouwen believes the greatest healing takes place when people no longer feel isolated by shame and guilt, discovering that others have their own fears and apprehensions. This is reminiscent of his text, *The Self-Availability of the Homosexual.* He also advocates that people must 'dare to take the risk to let others know what we are living' (Nouwen, 1996b: 59). This clearly suggests he is thinking about telling more people about his homosexuality: 'The important question is, "Do we have a circle of trustworthy friends where we feel safe enough to be intimately known and called to an always greater maturity?" Just as we lift up our glasses to people we trust and love, so we lift up the cup of our life to those from whom we do not want to have secrets and with whom we want to form community' (Nouwen, 1996b: 59).

Nouwen argues that as long as people live their deepest truth in secret, isolated from a community of love, the burden is too heavy: 'The fear of being known can make us split off our true inner selves from our public selves and make us despise ourselves even when we are acclaimed and praised by many. To know ourselves truly and acknowledge fully our own unique journey, we need to be known and acknowledged by others for who we are. We cannot live a spiritual life in secrecy' (Nouwen, 1996b: 96). If we accept that Nouwen is referring to his homosexuality, and I do not think there can be any other reading in the light of my findings, this passage suggests Nouwen has connected his sexuality with the spiritual life, probably for the first time (at least in print). We know that Nouwen had his own circle of gay friends at this time. He recognises that such love and care enables people like him to 'speak from the depth of our heart. Such friends take away the paralysis that secrecy creates' (Nouwen, 1996b: 97).

Can You Drink the Cup? becomes an anxious question for Nouwen about his own sexuality. It might also be re-phrased: Can I embrace my homosexuality and share it with others without shame or guilt? . This was not the book's intention, of course, but, as Nouwen reflects on nearly 40 years in the priesthood, these thoughts are close to the surface. Readers would draw their own personal connections with the spirituality he presents and this is perhaps where both his genius and dishonesty lie. He is clearly able to compose a compelling spiritual treatise based on his own experiences. This skill enables readers from any background to make an association with the text in the light of their own lives and to understand its spiritual significance. On the other hand, while concealing the true nature of his struggles with his readers, Nouwen can explore his own suffering without having to name it publicly. It is masked through universalised language of his own creation.

The book also suggests that Nouwen sees his sexuality as pre- determined and not a choice: 'For a long time we might not feel capable of accepting our own life; we might keep fighting for a better or at least a different life. Often a deep protest against our "fate" rises in us. We didn't choose our country, our parents, the color of our skin, our sexual orientation' (Nouwen, 1996b: 81).

Jackson claims that, through the book, Nouwen is 'begging to have the full story told', the story without any secrets: 'He did ask for a degree of privacy when we went out with him. We saw this as a process. He was blossoming daily so there was no question in our mind that he would be coming out at some point' (Jackson, 1997). Glaser confirms that, during his last year, Nouwen seemed more relaxed than he had ever known him, especially in relation to himself: 'He manifested a comfortableness with us that I had never experienced with him before. He talked about how he had been more open with his friends who were able to give him the kind of support he needed' (Glaser, 1997).[84]

These observations are complemented by a more open approach to homosexuality in Nouwen's final book, *Sabbatical Journey*. In many ways it is not his most inspiring volume, constituting a travelogue with laborious detail about the people he meets and the places he visits. It becomes a more valuable text, however, when seen as a diary of a gay pastor wondering whether or not to declare publicly his sexual orientation, leave the priesthood and be open to a permanent, stable sexual relationship. As the book charts Nouwen's journey day by day, I shall refer to the entries chronologically. But it is important to remember that, like all of Nouwen's books, this text was edited by others. In the acknowledgements, written after Nouwen's death, it is stated that the editor 'reduced the text by half' and that Nouwen's brother advised on decisions 'to make small changes and to delete some details' (quoted in Nouwen, 1998: xii). Nonetheless, as it stands, the text provides evidence from the author himself that his mind was rarely far from the possibility of making major changes in his life.

The first entry, for September 2, 1995, makes it apparent that Nouwen begins his sabbatical with a sense of freedom: 'Free to deepen friendships and explore new ways of loving. Free most of all to fight with the Angel of God and ask for a new blessing' (Nouwen, 1998: 3). But loneliness continues to be part of his spiritual journey. On Sunday, September 24, he likens the experience of an astronaut trying to

[84] At a public level, however, Nouwen was remained cautious. Glaser says he wanted to dedicate to Nouwen a book of prayers, *Coming Out to God*, but Nouwen 'politely declined'. Glaser comments: 'He was driven by his passion for communion and he felt called by his vocation not to express that sexually but to direct it spiritually. If you read his writings about Jesus, they are a lover's conversation with Jesus, which is characteristic of Christian mysticism' (Glaser, 1997).

describe a space voyage to the loneliness of the mystic: 'Having seen and experienced what cannot be expressed in words and still must be communicated, the astronauts and cosmonauts gave words to my own experience of priesthood ... a long loneliness and an inexpressible joy.' (Nouwen, 1998: 23). Three days later, anxiety and abandonment is setting in and Nouwen seems to be missing Ball, then director of L'Arche, Daybreak: 'I called and put a message on Nathan's voice mail. Soon e called back and said he would call again in the evening so that we could have ample time to talk. Talking lessened my anxiety and I felt peaceful again. No one can ever heal this wound, but when I can talk about it with a good friend I feel better' (Nouwen, 1998: 25). Nouwen describes the wound as an immense need for affection and an immense fear of rejection. It is, he says, easily touched and can soon start bleeding again. He believes it may be a gateway to his salvation and even a gift in disguise.

Nouwen's entry for September 29 concerns Catholicism and Homosexuality. He finds Andrew Sullivan's book, *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*, 'one of the most intelligent and convincing pleas for complete social acceptance of homosexuality I have ever read' (Nouwen, 1998: 27).[85] Sullivan is a deeply committed Catholic – 'just as open about being a Catholic as about being a homosexual' - who takes the church's teachings 'quite seriously'. This makes his discussion of the church's attitude towards homosexuality 'very compelling'. Nouwen comments:

> My own thoughts and emotions around this subject are very conflicted. Years of Catholic education and seminary training have caused me to internalise the Catholic Church's position. Still, my emotional development and my friendships with many homosexual people, as well as the recent literature on the subject, have raised many questions for me. There is a huge gap between my internalized homophobia and my increasing conviction that homosexuality is not a curse but a blessing for our society. Andrew Sullivan is helping me bridge this gap (Nouwen, 1998: 27).

Although it is not known how far this entry was edited, there is an inherent dishonesty in Nouwen's position since, as I have shown through successive

[85] Andrew Sullivan made his name as the openly gay English editor of America's political weekly, the *New Republic*. He is now an analyst of American politics for *The Sunday Times*.

interviews, Nouwen had been open and gradually become more positive about homosexuality in his discussions with friends during the last decade of his life. Here is an opportunity for Nouwen to be open with his readers but still he holds back, lacking Sullivan's honesty of approach (for understandable reasons). What is significant, however, is the fact that he acknowledges the gap between his emotional development and his friendship with gay people (the yearning for closeness) and his own internalisation of the Catholic church's position on homosexuality (the need to keep his distance).[86]

It is somewhat ironic that Nouwen's entry for October 5 acknowledges the great spiritual vision of Pope John Paul the Second and his address to the United Nations. Nouwen rarely mentions the papacy in his writings and never in his journals. It is possible that, through his remarks on the courage and leadership skills of 'this holy peacemaker' (Nouwen, 1998: 30), he is seeking to balance his previous comments on homosexuality. This may be a cynical view but papal acclamation was never Nouwen's style. As if to achieve perfect harmony, on October 9 he mentions sexuality and the Pope in one extended entry. Nouwen has been watching the papal visit to America on television and it is likely that his anguishing over the church's teaching has given him cause to study the pontiff more intently. He notes that the Pope's compassionate vision extends to those living with AIDS: 'John Paul II has strong opinions with which many people disagree. The many controversies in the church concerning the role of women, sexual ethics, and the exercise of authority show clearly that there is a lot to discuss and to reflect on. I guess that many of John Paul II's ideas will be rethought and reformulated during the decades to come' (Nouwen, 1998: 33).

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[86]When I was shown Nouwen's original manuscript for *Sabbatical Journey*, I noticed that he had quoted Sullivan at length about homosexuality. It was a quotation running into several pages but it had been marked for deletion by the friend who had been asked to edit the manuscript after his death – and did not appear in the final version of the book. While, for editorial reasons, the quotation may have seemed too extensive to be included, it could nonetheless suggest that the courage Nouwen had shown in quoting from this particular book had been deemed inappropriate for his wider readership. Commenting on the way in which friends subbed his books, another editor remarked: 'He liked the idea that what was most personal was most universal. We had to remind him that what was most personal was sometimes best kept private' (Mogabgab 1997). While this advice was evidently given with the best intentions of protecting Nouwen, it could be also be seen as deceptive if the editing gave readers a more clinical version of Nouwen's thinking at any particular time. Nouwen tended to accept their judgements and this might account for the fact that, in some places, Nouwen's writings are ambiguous, enigmatic and elliptical, especially where he is discussing intimacy and loneliness.

After a visit to see Carmen at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on October 18, he comments: 'I don't know what would happen if a Carmen barged into my life and swept me off my feet' (Nouwen, 1998: 39). Following a visit to a circus two days later, he refers to a man's 'straining, muscular body, which radiated so much vitality and energy. I felt a connection' (Nouwen, 1998: 41). Comments on a new book about Mozart, recorded on November 23, seem to mirror the paradoxes of his own creative life: 'Music so harmonious, enchanting, and exhilarating, a life so painful, melancholy, and deeply tragic!' (Nouwen, 1998: 54).

Nouwen is consistently aware, then, of his own emotional feelings. The arts put him in touch with these deeper stirrings. On Tuesday, December 5, he notes that he has just finished 'one of the most riveting books I have read in a long time'. Alan Helms' *Young Man from the Provinces. A Gay Life Before Stonewall* gives him a 'gut sense of the journey from entrapment to freedom'. He quotes words of Helms which could apply to him, 'I learned that being envied is the loneliest pleasure on earth, that self-absorption guarantees unhappiness, that the worst motive for action is groundless fear' (Nouwen, 1998: 62). It is important to note that Nouwen emphasises the experiences of the gay writer which connect with him. On December 26, he suddenly experiences a deep love for all the friends he misses: 'It seems that sometimes distance creates closeness, absence creates presence, loneliness creates community! I felt my whole being, body, mind, and spirit, yearning to give and receive love without condition, without fear, without reservation' (Nouwen, 1998: 73).

Throughout his journal, however, there is evidently an undercurrent of anger, depression and fear of rejection, feelings which melt only after he has a telephone conversation on February 10 with Ball who responds 'with great love' to Nouwen's disappointment that they had not recently had a good conversation (Nouwen, 1998: 102). The diary continues with details of Nouwen's travels and companions. Friendship is what Nouwen most desires; isolation what he dreads. On March 11, after a good week's holiday in New Mexico with a friend, he is angered that the friend does not appear to be paying him enough attention at the airport. 'Suddenly I had the experience of being alone. I felt as though we were just going through the motions, and that, in reality, Frank wanted to be by himself' (Nouwen, 1998: 124).

Five days later the journal records Nouwen's attraction to Anthony Heilbut's biography of Thomas Mann which reveals the complexities of 'a disciplined and sensual, artistic and political, expansive and depressive, imaginative and narcissistic' married homosexual, self-revealing and deeply hidden, famous and anxious to be praised ...' (Nouwen, 1998: 128).

On the evening of Saturday, March 16, Nouwen prays for Thomas Mann as though for himself: 'It seems that Mann never became free from the inner and outer clouds that darkened his heart and his society. His was a very long, extremely productive, but deeply tragic life. It is as if redemption never came to him and if he wanted to redeem himself he never could. Tonight I pray for Thomas Mann. Lord, have mercy upon him, whether he is as great as Goethe or not. Give him the love that he yearned for all his life but that even the Nobel Prize couldn't bring him. Keep him safe in your all-forgiving, all-embracing love' (Nouwen, 1998: 129). Four days Nouwen reflects on Michelangelo's poems to Tommaso Cavalieri, a young Roman nobleman the artist first met when he was 57. Michelangelo's love for Tommaso, and Tommaso's affection for him, 'made him feel fully alive. He writes, "With your bright eyes, I see the living light which my blind eyes alone can never see; and your sure feet take up that load for me which my lame gait would let fall helplessly. My very thoughts are framed within your heart"'. Comments Nouwen: 'These words evoke deep feelings in me. They reveal my true dependence on human affection and love.' The following day he enthuses, 'Tomorrow Nathan is coming, and that makes me happy' (Nouwen, 1998: 131-132).

On April 3, Nouwen devotes an entire entry to describing his reaction to the suicide of a gay man he knew: 'My whole interior flooded' (Nouwen, 1998: 139). Recollecting the grief of the man's partner, Nouwen writes: 'I just listened. It was a story of love and pain, communion and separation, intimacy and distance. So strange! That was someone that I saw only twice, but he rooted himself somewhere in my heart' (Nouwen, 1998: 140). Three days later, during his homily on Holy Saturday, Nouwen finds himself elaborating on these themes as he preaches on the resurrection of the body, back in his community of the mentally disabled at L'Arche: 'Our care for the body calls us to unity beyond organization, to intimacy beyond eroticism, and to integrity beyond psychological wholeness. Unity, intimacy and

integrity are the three qualities of the resurrected life. We are called to break through the boundaries of nationality, race, sexual orientation, age, and mental capacities and create a unity of love that allows the weakest among us to live well. We are called to go beyond the places of lust, sexual need, and desire for physical union to a spiritual intimacy that involves body, mind and heart' (Nouwen, 1998: 142).

The intensity of some of these reflections leads Nouwen to make his most significant journal entry on May 19, inspired by a conversation with a man called Jim with whom he has been discussing how to spend old age. It is a dilemma which causes Nouwen anxiety and it is evident that Nouwen's tether both to his own reputation and the institution of the Catholic church is denying him the personal freedom he desires:

> Over the years I have built up a certain reputation. People think of me as a Catholic priest, a spiritual writer, a member of a community with mentally handicapped people, a lover of God, and a lover of people. It is wonderful to have such a reputation. But lately I find I get caught in it and I experience it as restricting. Without wanting to, I feel a certain pressure within me to keep living up to that reputation and to do, say, and write things that fit the expectations of the Catholic Church, L'Arche, my family, my friends, my readers. I'm caught because I'm feeling that there is some kind of agenda that I must follow in order to be faithful.
>
> But since I am in my sixties, new thoughts, feelings, emotions, and passions have arisen within me that are not all in line with my previous thoughts, feelings, emotions and passions. So I find myself asking, "What is my responsibility to the world around me, and what is my responsibility to myself? What does it mean to be faithful to my vocation? Does it require that I be consistent with my earlier way of living or thinking, or does it ask for the courage to move in new directions, even when doing so may be disappointing for some people?" (Nouwen, 1998: 168).

This acknowledgement could indicate that Nouwen is on the brink of entering an important new relationship but is, at the same time, aware that it might involve a radical change of direction in terms of his public reputation. Nouwen's attendance at his first same-sex marriage on June 9 gives him an opportunity to reflect on gay commitments, though he admits to feeling lost at the Jewish ceremony: 'Mark and Paul have been living together for twenty years. Only recently did they decide to sacramentalize their relationship. In Saturday's paper there was an article about gay weddings. In the article Paul explains his decision to get formally married with these

words: "I got tired of living in sin." That tongue-in-cheek remark summarizes for me the moral predicament of gay and lesbian people. While everyone is discussing the morality of the homosexual life, these two men are discussing the morality of not being married!' (Nouwen, 1998: 182).

Nouwen still manages to distance himself from his own sexual reality as though he is a reporter at an event rather than a person fascinated by homosexual relationships. Yet, for all his many relationships around the world during his sabbatical year, Nouwen continues to regard Ball as his best friend. The entry for July 31 records Nouwen's embarrassment and shame at putting 'my inner burden on my best friend,' discussing an anxiety that has plagued him for several months: 'Nathan told me that he found it hard, not so much to listen to my pain, but to realize that I had walked with it for so long without sharing it ... I sometimes wonder how I am going to survive emotionally' (Nouwen, 1998: 207).

After his sabbatical, Nouwen returned to Daybreak before preparing for a trip to Russia to make a film about his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He was not in the best of health and the burden of resuming his public life seems to have weighed heavily. He telephoned his gay friends, Joseph Stellpflug and David Martin, 'in desperation' and eventually went to see them: 'When he arrived, we started to catch up, then he said, "I am feeling really vulnerable right now and I can't even hear what you are saying. I just need to be held." He sat between us on the couch. We wrapped our arms round him and just held him for ten minutes. He was anxious and agitated but felt safe' (Martin, 1997).

Nouwen left Canada en route to Russia on Sunday, September 15, 1996. He flew initially to Holland where he was due to meet the film's producer. But at his hotel in Hilversum, he suffered a heart attack and died in hospital from another coronary on Saturday, September 21, aged 64. Nathan Ball, who flew to the Netherlands to be at Nouwen's bedside, was the last person to see Nouwen alive. According to Ball, Nouwen 'died at peace with himself, his family, his own faith community of L'Arche, his friends, his vocation as a priest, and the God whose everlasting love had been Henri's beacon for sixty-four years' (in Nouwen, 1998: 226). However, other friends believe Nouwen might have died in a state of anxiety about the reconciliation

of his homosexuality with his priesthood. Harank thinks Nouwen's inner anguish over his vocation and his sexuality 'might have contributed to his early death' (Harank, 1997). Jonas believes Nouwen often felt guilty and ashamed of his sexual feelings, even though his theology and pastoral counselling affirmed the goodness of sexuality and its share in divinity. He had inherited a longstanding Christian suspicion of sexuality, often interpreted by conservative Christians as 'the evil desires of the flesh.' Jonas comments: 'Most often, Henri could not help but label all his erotic urges as mere "lust." He did not like the messiness of his emotional needs. He wished that his yearnings for love, attention and affection could be met entirely in his relationship with Jesus, and he tried to live as if that were true, even when he felt no consolation' (Jonas, 1999: 50).

Monette argues that, while Nouwen's life had been 'a great gift' to many at a public level, his death was a gift to even more people 'at a very much deeper level' because in death 'they have an opportunity to know who their spiritual mentor really was' and the form of love or grace he represented: 'His life is affirming for many people whose lives are seen as sinful, against the law of nature or abnormal. Nouwen's life is such an affirmation of who we are in our struggle for spirituality, growth and grace because God loved him so deeply as a gay man' (Monette, 1997).

Nouwen had two funerals. The first, at St Catherine's Cathedral, Utrecht, was addressed by Jean Vanier who said he had sensed within Nouwen 'the wounded heart of Christ, the anguish of Christ ... Our God is a lover, a wounded lover. This is the mystery of Christ, the wounded lover. And somewhere that is Henri, a wounded lover, yearning to be loved, yearning to announce love'.[87] The second funeral took place at the Slovak Catholic Cathedral of the Transfiguration, Markham, Ontario.[88] Nouwen is buried in a graveyard at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, King City, Ontario.

[87] Extracted from Vanier's funeral homily, Wednesday, September 25, 1996, distributed by L'Arche.

[88] The service took place on Saturday, September 28, 1996.

6

THE WOUND AND THE GIFT OF HOMOSEXUALITY

In the first part of this thesis, I showed how Nouwen's concept of 'the wounded healer' applied very much to himself. I argued that Nouwen's homosexuality was intrinsic to his struggles as a priest but, at the same time, inspired and ordered his spiritual thinking. That one of the Roman Catholic Church's most influential spiritual writers of recent times should have been gay seems at least to throw into question its unequivocal teaching that the homosexual orientation is essentially 'disordered.'[89] But, as I have illustrated throughout the preceding chapters, Nouwen's discomfort with his sexuality – largely as a result of his expectations as a Catholic priest – resulted in a lifetime of emotional and psychological uncertainty. Paradoxically, such suffering bore fruit through his spiritual writings. For Nouwen, writing was a spiritual discipline which could redeem a painful experience. It 'can help us to concentrate, to get in touch with the deeper stirrings of our hearts, to clarify our minds, to process confusing emotions, to reflect on our experiences, and to store significant events in our memories. Writing can also be good for others who might read what we write' (Nouwen, 1996d: 135).

While Nouwen's struggles with his homosexuality fostered a certain circumspection in print, they nonetheless enabled him to write meaningfully and more generally about the impact of anguish and fear on the spiritual life. Nouwen's difficulty in accepting his homosexuality arose because he treated it as a wound rather than owned it as a gift. In this chapter, I shall examine this 'wound of homosexuality' and argue how it might be turned into a gift for the Church. My justification for this approach is based entirely on Nouwen's spirituality of the wounded healer: 'When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers' (Nouwen, 1996d: 214).

[89] Although detailed sales figures of Nouwen's books are not available, publishers are agreed that, in the late 20th century, Nouwen's publications were always high in the religious best-seller lists around the world.

Drawing on the work of several gay Catholic thinkers and reflecting on the life and spirituality of Nouwen, I shall argue that the wound of homosexuality can only become a gift for the church if it is received as such, both by gay Catholics and the institution itself. Before discussing the healing force of homosexuality, I shall consider its wounding effects.

Unbinding the Wound

Homosexuality damages gay people and the church because it is treated as a wound rather than owned as a gift. The wound has several interconnected, yet distinguishable, components: Denial, Fear and Alienation. These features can have a devastating effect on the psychological welfare of the gay spiritual person. Harank sees them as essentially arising out of the reluctance of homosexuals to accept their sexuality as a gift:[90] 'When such a wound bleeds a lot without attention being paid to it, the person ends up losing a lot of blood and a lot of life. That part of his life is not fed by the great symbol of life which is blood. It atrophies, constricts and eventually causes death and the destruction of the body' (Harank, 2000).

Harank argues that, by failing to pay attention to this wound or pretending it does not exist, gay people operate at the level of denial which can result in behavioural patterns which are psychologically harmful.[91] The most common trait is a natural compulsion to disguise, a technique homosexuals perfect almost unthinkingly as the years of suppression continue. On a human level, Harank argues, denial and disguise each have their place in the spectrum of human meaning. But denial can become an essential coping mechanism when a gay person is not ready to deal with the darker or

[90] Michael Harank, who was Nouwen's secretary at Harvard, pointed out that while Nouwen had been aware of his homosexuality at a young age, no space had been created to honour the gift or 'call it out of him.' His homosexuality therefore took the shape of a cross and became a wound that bled profusely (Harank, 2000).

[91] Harank illustrates his observations with reference to the film, *Priest*, a study of the dilemma of a young Catholic priest in Liverpool confronting his homosexuality. It was written by Jimmy McGovern and directed by Antonia Bird (BBC Films Production, 1995). Friends say Nouwen saw the film and identified with it. One scene shows a priest removing his dog collar and donning a leather jacket before heading off for a night in a gay club. Another scene features the priest discarding the jacket and returning to his clerical clothing. These visual images, Harank suggests, symbolise 'the spiritual schizophrenia' which results from a gay person being unable to welcome an essential part of his humanity. Priests in particular become dissociated and schizoid in their behaviour, unable to integrate their emotional responses with the responsibilities of priesthood (Harank, 2000).

shadow side of his or her personality. Disguise, therefore, becomes the means through which gay people communicate. This can result in colourful and creative behaviour as they, like costumed actors, manifest a certain theatricality as a means of touching the truth about their God-given humanity. But conversely disguise can also 'breed a cesspool of secrecy which becomes a stagnant pool instead of the waters of creativity' (Harank, 2000). Gay priests, he argues, tend to operate on the latter level. Instead of appreciating their sexuality as a gift, they try to drown it in pools of denial and disguise. This, in turn, creates suffering for gay priests as well as those they serve: 'Gay people use denial and disguise to run away from what can be a great stirring water of the Holy Spirit. For gay priests this terrible struggle can get expressed in unhealthy relationships with themselves and with others. They are unable to break out of the vicious circle of the secrecy and suspicion. Denial and disguise eventually create a kind of hell for them and the people they are around' (Harank, 2000).[92]

Babuscio says researchers are agreed that, on average, three out of four gays 'pass' as a means of avoiding social sanctions. Passing, he notes, tends to be defined within theatrical metaphor, in that it means to play a role: pretending to be something a person is not. In the context of homosexuality, the emphasis is on concealment, not pretence. 'To pass' is to camouflage one's gayness by withholding information that might lead others to identify oneself as being homosexual: 'Such a strategy of passing, motivated as it is by anticipation of the negative sanctions that would follow discovery, inevitably leads to increased confusion about one's sexual feelings, as well as a heightened sense of guilt and shame' (Babuscio, 1988: 38).

Sullivan argues that the rituals of deceit, impersonation and appearance are learned by self-aware homosexuals in childhood. Erotic attraction to people of the same-sex are controlled and sublimated through a psychological process of deception and self-

[92] Harank thinks there are no places within diocesan or religious communities which offer a sanctuary for gay priests to bring the gift of sexuality to each other because of the accumulation of guilt, repression, secrecy and suspicion 'which they carry around with them like a bag of bones'. Unlike the prophet, Ezekiel, he says, they are unable to create a living figure out of the bones because of their clerical situation: 'Eventually something breaks. For Nouwen that moment came when he fell in love with Ball and found his passion unrequited. His spiritual and emotional world collapsed and he went into severe depression. But he began to live an incarnational life with the various aspects of himself he had denied' (Harank, 2000).

contempt, honed through the developing years.[93] The gay teenager 'learns that that which would most give him meaning is most likely to destroy him in the eyes of others; that the condition of his friendships is the subjugation of himself' (Sullivan, 1995: 12).[94]

Sullivan believes the origins of homosexuality are probably due to a mixture of genetic factors and very early childhood development (before the ages of five or six).[95] The condition of homosexuality is as involuntary as heterosexuality is for heterosexuals. The orientation is therefore evident from the outset of the formation of a person's emotional identity. While the gay person observes that heterosexual marriage is the primary emotional goal of his peers, he intuits that this will not be his path.

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[93] Nouwen's prolific writing and all-consuming restlessness is certainly characteristic of such self-denial. It is possible to detect the Nouwen temperament through Sullivan's analysis. It is therefore not surprising Nouwen was attracted to Sullivan's work. Sullivan believes the experience of growing up with a different emotional and psychological make-up than the majority of people inevitably alters a person's self-perception, tending to make her or him more cautious and distant, more attuned to appearance and its foibles, more self-conscious and even more reflective. Homosexuals have created 'safe professions within which to hide and protect each other' (Sullivan, 1995: 198). The worlds of the arts, literature, architecture, design and fashion – 'professions of appearance' (one might add priesthood) – often attract gay people responding to oppression. Many homosexual children, feeling distant from their peers, become expert in calculating ways to 'disguise their inner feelings, to "pass"'. (Sullivan, 1995: 198). Suppressing their natural emotions, they find formal outlets of expression through music, the theatre and art. One might add liturgy.

[94] Sullivan's words echo those of Nouwen in *The Inner Voice of Love*, such as: 'Not being welcome is your greatest fear. It connects with your birth fear, your fear of not being welcome in this life, and your death fear, your fear of not being welcome in the life after this' (Nouwen, 1996c: 101). Nouwen asserts that such thoughts cannot come from God: 'The Prince of Darkness wants you to believe that your life is a mistake and that there is no home for you. But every time you allow these thoughts to affect you, you set out on the road to self-destruction' (Nouwen, 1996c: 102). Many gay people might have had a similar sense of displacement and 'not belonging' because of their difficulties connecting with the social norms. In Nouwen's case, the insecurities seem to have been channelled into his priestly ministry.

[95] The psychologist, Peter Naus, who was a close friend of Nouwen, challenges suggestions that the roots of these insecurities were related to Nouwen's homosexuality. The primary issue 'was not his sexual orientation but a deep-seated insecurity, a sense that he was not securely connected to the people around him, including the significant others in his life'. The source 'lay in the distant past.' (Naus in Porter, 2001: 85). However, in view of what has emerged during the research about Nouwen's relationship with his father, we must not dismiss Sullivan's thesis that gay men can become trapped in a cycle driven not only by their own sense of inadequacy as men but also 'by the wounds they still carry from their childhood', especially those associated with a distant father. There is a deep need on the part of homosexual men to heal that wound (Sullivan, 1998: 126).

> While its form comforts, its content appals. It requires a systematic dishonesty; and this dishonesty is either programmed into your soul and so warps your integrity, or is rejected in favor of – what? You scan your mind for an alternative. You dream grandiose dreams, construct a fantasy of a future, pour your energies into some massive distraction, pursue a consuming career to cover up the lie at the center of your existence. You are caught between escape and the constant daily wrench of self-denial. It is a vise from which many teenagers and young adults never emerge (Sullivan, 1995: 190).

McNeill asserts that, for many religiously-minded people, the homophobia of family, church and culture can become interiorised to such an extent that, in the past, some homosexuals believed their feelings of difference were theirs alone. This, he argues, leads to a total suppression of the gay identity through pathological religious concepts of fear and shame.[96] Having suppressed all feelings, the individual lives 'out of the head,' cultivating intellectual skills which enable them to submerge themselves in work or study. They build their identity on their ability to meet the needs of others while denying their own needs. Many from a Catholic background, McNeill believes, will, frequently unconsciously, use a vocation to celibate religious life to avoid having to deal at all with sexuality and intimacy. 'Sooner or later the process of self-denial and repression will bottom out with serious depression, rage, and on frequent occasions serious alcohol or drug abuse, compulsive acting out of needs for intimacy, affection, and sexual fulfillment leading to greater shame, guilt, and fear, sometimes resulting in psychological breakdown and even efforts at suicide' (McNeill, 1995: 37). According to McNeill, the Catholic Church believes 'staying in the closet' and repressing all desires for intimacy and sexual fulfillment constitutes the moral gay life. After 25 years of practising psychotherapy with gays and lesbians, McNeill states unequivocally:

> I am convinced that anyone who follows the Church program will end by destroying themselves in terms of both mental health and spiritual maturity (McNeill 1995: 53).

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[96] The pre-Vatican II church's emphasis on authority could have led to pathological religion, according to McNeill. This has much in common with the dysfunctional family, relying on fear of punishment to obtain obedience, using guilt as a lever for manipulation and control. Freedom is feared, and doubts punished and repressed because they are seen as threatening.

These are strong words but apply particularly to gay priests who may have to communicate the church's position to people they counsel, while themselves living a sexually active life. Soames says the priesthood itself creates its own disguises and boundaries for gay men.[97] Soames believes all priests occupy roles or play a variety of parts. Homosexuality is often concealed and therefore not owned by the gay priests themselves: 'Within that, they learn to allow parts of themselves to come to the fore and others to recede depending on where they are. Within that context it is very easy for the whole of their own sexual lives to be in disguise' (Soames, 2000). The church's teaching about homosexuality being a disorder can be so psychologically devastating that, for priests who represent the institution, the necessary disguises can 'lead to a kind of multiple personality disorder.' If the multiple parts are not owned consciously, they can result in a psychological disorder. Held together, these parts could be a healthy enrichment. The person as a whole is not two-dimensional but rich and complex. The so-called disorder, therefore, 'could be a positive if brought into the conscious mind and worked with in a creative way'. He sees the priesthood as a safe haven, a solution, a role, 'a ready-made identity that one can put on like a suit of clothes' (Soames, 2000).

Stuart's work features a priest with a similar identity crisis, a secret he dared not share with anyone. He did not want to be considered a leper and feared rejection, so he indulged in pretence: 'The real me was buried, repressed and oppressed. I interiorized my oppression ... The story of my last ten years has been a story of gradually emerging from my self-imposed entombment' (Stuart, 1993: 43).

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[97] 'Father Ian Soames' is the pseudonym of a gay Catholic priest and psychotherapist, living in Britain. In an interview for this thesis, he says his own experience resulted in 'terminal loneliness' and took him into psychotherapy as a patient. He owes a great deal to the church he loved but the damage it has caused is undeniable. Soames can connect his own experience as a gay priest with Nouwen's life story: 'What I resonated with most and hoped to escape from was his over-spiritualisation of everything and the drivenness of it. Hyperactivity is an avoidance of loneliness and isolation. It is a means of making connections with people which are at times creative, productive and helpful but are in place of a given intimacy, a shared intimacy. Nouwen's restlessness was consistent with my own personality and understanding that all human love and intimacy is a sacrament of the love and intimacy God offers us. It keeps alive in us the idea that our hearts will find rest. All gay people are confronted with particularly great difficulties and, as much as they engage with them, they can arrive at a place of real spiritual and mental health; as much as they avoid them, they can find themselves in a state of great desperation and disaster' (Soames 2000).

But homosexuality is not only concealed at cost by the church's priests; it is camouflaged within the institution itself. According to Sipe, psychological denial exists in the homosocial structure of the priesthood. Vatican statements against homosexuality are directed towards the pastoral care of laity by bishops and clergy. Since any sexual activity for celibates is a violation of the 'perfect chastity' enshrined in canon law, theoretically, the papal documents concern only lay people. There is certainly no acknowledgement within them that there is a clerical issue with homosexuality. There is, observes Sipe, 'an aura of psychological denial that surrounds questions of homosexualities and the clergy' (Sipe, 1990: 108). Sipe says this is partly attributable to the fact that any sexual activity among celibates tends to exist in the 'secret forum' and is later dealt with in the secrecy of the confessional. (Sipe, 1990: 112). He argues that the underlying assumptions that reinforce denial of the homosexualities in the priesthood are deeply ingrained in the clerical organisation structure: "Hidden, exclusive exchanges that threaten to break the defensive denial have to be preserved and shielded by the system of secrecy, are defended as "acts" rather than "relationships," and form the core of problematic homosexualities in priestly training (Sipe, 1990: 112). Sipe's research revealed that more than 100 priests reported incidents of problematic sexual approaches while they were in the seminary. But the training structure was preserved, he claims, by a system of denial and secrecy to obliterate accountability:

> There is no other single element so destructive to sexual responsibility among clergy as the system of secrecy that has both shielded behavior and reinforced denial' (Sipe 1990: 113).

Sullivan argues that the sublimation of sexual longing can create a particular form of alienated person: 'a more ferocious perfectionist, a cranky individual, an extremely brittle emotionalist, an ideological fanatic. It can lead to brilliant lives and lives of devastating loneliness. The abandonment of intimacy and the rejection of one's emotional core are ... alloyed evils. All too often they preserve the persona at the expense of the person' (Sullivan, 1995: 189).

Alison maintains that, for as long as there are uniforms, there will be substitutes 'for the hard work of being a person'. But for some people uniforms are necessary to provide a space to grow into. The disguise is not with the uniform, he argues, but

with the discourse – what people actually say. One of the temptations for a religious person in discussions is to avoid self-implicatory speech, to talk about them, in objective terms, not to allow himself to be chewed over, being unable to say "I". Alison explains:

> This becomes more evident for those who are gay because the temptation to talk about gay people as "they," even if you are one of them, is clearly – and I have seen it time and again in the clerical life – a strong one and a form of dishonesty. Lots of training does not encourage people to descend into the painful places of talking from someone who is loved, or feels unloved, or is trying to discover what it is to be loved.
>
> The issue has never been about same-sex practice but about violence being dressed up as the word of God. Our identity is formed by our dealing with that violence which has to be fought against. How we set ourselves free from idols is what it is about' (Alison, 2000).[98]

Much theological language around sexuality, Harank argues, has become so spiritualised and out- of- the- body that it is simply another way of avoiding the reality of God's creating people as sexual beings: the erotic, creative energy within each of us is denied and, often out of self-disgust, the masks are put on. Yet almost every culture utilises the mask as a way of communicating certain lived emotions. For example, some cultures allow for the expression of the emotion, represented by the mask, in a creative way such as through music and dance. But gay priests tend to wear only the masks of the negative emotions – of fear, suspicion, anxiety, secrecy and shame: 'Masks of denial and disguise are not helpful in creating a deep awareness of unity and Jesus's deepest prayer was the prayer of unity. You can only become united, become one with God, if you bring all of yourself to the altar where the drama of our lives is enacted. The masks of sexuality in the church, especially

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[98] Alison, a gay Dominican priest who heft his order and the ordained ministry, believes the conflict between being a homosexual priest and being described by the church as morally disordered, 'does not provide a rich seed bed for healthy growth and maturity'. He explains that 40 years ago the church was one of the safest places 'and most liberal havens' for homosexuals in an extremely unsafe society. But with so many gay people 'coming out', the clerical context now seems oppressive. That homosexuality is a make-or-break issue for the church is, according to Alison, 'clearly idolatrous.' He explains: 'Curiously I think the Vatican has worked out that this is a third order truth. This is very significant because it should not be an issue destructive of the gift of faith, the gift of communication or the gift of being a priest or religious. It is irrational that the issue should have reached the importance it has' (Alison, 2000).

among gay priests, have been dark, negative and menacing. A person hidden in a dark closet has a very different face than one which has come out into the light, a light which reveals and shadows at the same time' (Harank, 2000).

At the heart of this game of disguise and denial is the issue of shame, 'a sickness of the soul', exacerbated by secrecy. Kaufman and Raphael indicate that many gay people prefer to hide and remain closeted in order to avoid shame. Historical prejudice, religious attitudes, societally imposed silence, along with scenes of ridicule associated with being gay, have all conspired to reinforce the pattern of hiding and secrecy: 'Self-disclosure is an inherent source of shame, however and whenever it occurs, because it invariably means exposing your inner self directly to the gaze of another person. Self-disclosure of any kind is actually a form of self-exposure, so that whenever we reveal ourselves, we risk shame' (Kaufman and Raphael, 1996: 113).

Sullivan makes the point that the shame attached to homosexuality is different from that connected with race. Because the disgrace of homosexuality is associated with behaviour, the level of shame and collapse of self-esteem may be more difficult to overcome: 'To reach puberty and find oneself falling in love with members of one's own sex is to experience a mixture of self-discovery and self-disgust that never leaves a human consciousness' (Sullivan 1995: 154).

Shame attacks the heart of what makes a human being human: the ability to love and be loved. Even the worst form of persecution of minorities usually allowed for the integrity of the marital bond or the emotional core of the human being. Sullivan quotes Orwell's *1984*, in which the final capitulation to totalitarianism can be achieved only by sacrificing the loved one, Julia, in favour of Big Brother. As Winston Smith greets Room 101 at the end of his torture, the only way to save himself from ravenous rats is to plead torture for Julia instead of himself. According to Sullivan, Orwell intuits that the ultimate way to break a human spirit is to force a person to betray the integrity of their love. But the prohibition against homosexuality *begins* with such repression, says Sullivan. It forbids, at a child's earliest form of development, the possibility of the highest form of human happiness. It is instilled by the people the child loves best and trusts the most. In many cases, the homosexual

life begins 'in a well-appointed, superficially welcoming, comfortingly familiar' version of Room 101. In some ways, he argues, its mildness only intensifies the sacrifice which many young homosexuals are required to make:

> The depth of this wound and the intensity of this hurt is obviously the primary reason that liberals seek to extend legal protections to homosexuals to prevent the injury from being worsened by public prejudice. And given the intensity of the injury, who could doubt the sincerity and compassion of the motive?' (Sullivan, 1995: 156).

In the vocabulary of homosexual woundedness, shame is closely allied to guilt. McNeill believes the major threat to the psychological and spiritual health of gay people, especially those from a strong Christian background, is guilt which, along with its companions, shame and low self-esteem, can develop into self-hate. The danger of destructive guilt and shame has accompanied ever step of gay and lesbian human development. The AIDS crisis led many gays to regress into patterns of guilt and shame which the gay liberation movement had worked to break down. 'With every new homophobic statement made by television evangelists, the Roman Catholic church hierarchy, and other church spokespersons, many gay and lesbian Christians experience a sharp set-back in their effort to achieve self-acceptance and mental health' (McNeill, 1996: 54).

It is clear, then, that the church has itself been complicit in reinforcing denial and its tentacles of secrecy, disguise, shame and guilt by branding homosexuals sinners and, in previous generations, warning of eternal damnation to those engaging in same-sex relationships. How these burdens can be lifted to serve the church will be addressed in Chapter 7. Here it is important to note McNeill's observation that shameful feelings are aroused most acutely for gay people when they see themselves violating in some way the most basic values with which humanity identifies. They become psychologically dangerous, he warns, when they start to colour their perceptions about who they are and how worthy they are. Pathological shame can take the form of self-loathing and self-hatred when the gay person likens his sexuality to a flaw in his character. An example might be feeling ashamed of one's need for love and affection, interpreting it as an inherent weakness. Such an attitude is an impediment to psychological and spiritual growth and can lead homosexuals to encounters in

secret, but dangerous, places, rather than open themselves to a more open, healthy relationship with a person of the same sex.

Although, at the time of his writing, McNeill was unaware of Nouwen's personal struggle with homosexuality, he quotes his writings periodically in his books. In his consideration of fear, McNeill refers his readers to Nouwen's words: 'We are fearful people ... It often seems that fear has invaded every part of our being to such a degree that we no longer know what a life without fear feels like' (McNeill, 1996: 42).

McNeill notes that fear has so deeply penetrated people's psyches that it controls most decisions, choices and actions. Reflecting on the origins of this fear, McNeill again quotes Nouwen who thinks the answer can be found in the relation of fear to power: 'I began to see the simple fact that those I fear have a great power over me. Those who could make me afraid could also make me do what they wanted me to do' (McNeill, 1996: 43). But McNeill points out that for gays and lesbians the greatest enemy is not an outside opponent but the fear within them. While gay people share some of the general fears of humanity, 'staying in the closet', self-denial, self-rejection, self-hatred, AIDS and fleeing from the presence of God constitute their own set of unique fears, encased by the teaching of the churches, which make use of a god of fear to control their members. 'We frequently give in to our own form of homophobic fear that crushes out all love for our lesbian sisters and gay brothers. Instead of seeing the glory of God in our being fully alive as lesbians and gay men, we sometimes believe that God's glory lies in our self-rejection and persecution of our brothers and sisters' (McNeill, 1996: 44).

Wolf's study of gay priests includes one anonymous account of a homosexual clergyman analysing his fears of being counted among the last, the lost and the lonely. His emerging un-ease over loneliness, intimacy and sexual identity were suppressed by an authoritarian seminary system which stunted personal growth and maturity. As the priest gradually faced the full reality of himself, he became afraid of any form of affection: 'To get emotionally close to people scared me for two reasons: either they might get to know me as gay and reject me, or they might become so attractive that I would lose self-control' (Wolf, 1989: 150).

Nouwen's complaint about needing to keep his distance is indicative of many priests' lives. In Nouwen's own case it produced scenarios where he was cloying in relationships and confused friends in the process. According to Colby, each of his friendships became a vehicle for exploration: 'Each person became the engine that drove his curiosity and intensity but eventually he burnt out every single vehicle because he had to go beyond each person. Every relationship was a grand experiment. The goal was not the relationship but the knowledge or the experience or the mystery' (Colby, 1998).[99]

Nouwen, then, was typical of gay priests who are professionally intimate. 'He spent his whole life deliberately getting into deep intimacy with strangers. The driving impulse was to know the full mystery of God but on a practical level it left a lot of people thinking they were in his intimate circle when they were not even close' (Colby, 1998). Often Nouwen appeared like a man possessed by fear: 'When he had so much on his mind he almost looked paralysed because he was so withdrawn inside himself' (Colby, 1998).

Harank confirms this assessment. Many gay people live fragmented lives because their sexuality is a source of great vulnerability in a heterosexual culture violent, he thinks, in its behaviour and attitudes to gay people. Nouwen was a priest in a church which did not honour sexuality, did not give him the tools to deal with sexuality and was itself violent in its teachings:

> Nouwen could not make sexuality part of his writings, his life or his intimate relationships and I think it was because of the fear. When a community does not call out a gift that is part of someone, as it does in Native American worlds, you develop a Dr Jekyll/ Mr Hyde mentality and an emotional life which is skewed and afflicted. You enter into the lives of people, not as a person who is able to welcome various gifts of others, but as someone terribly

[99] Colby claims Nouwen's primary fear was that of the power of the simple human relationship. He kept every human being at arm's length and there were aspects of his life even his intimate friends did not know about him: 'Nouwen was not a hypocrite because he could not discern his own behaviour. He was a professional intimate which is not to suggest he was an intimacy gigolo. He did not trade on another's intimacy. There were often times when he would give a burst of intimacy and hope for it to be returned. He would get some back but then it would fade. There was a kind of adolescent idealism about it' (Colby, 1998).

frightened of the gift of being gay. You run in fright as animals do when they are being pursued by a perceived enemy' (Harank, 2000).

Yet even gay men who form sexual relationships are not themselves immune from the fear of intimacy. Gray and Isensee point out that emotional vulnerability can stifle relationships and the opening up of innermost thoughts and desires. However, they argue that this fear should be regarded more as a learned reaction than a pathological trait. If a gay person's deepest identity is disclosed, the accumulated fear of abandonment over many years can create the development of a false self which makes homosexual men cautious in owning and sharing their true feelings: 'Fear is a feeling, not a character deficit. Avoidance of intimacy can be seen as a protective coping strategy in response to early homophobic experiences, rather than a permanent part of one's personality' (Alexander, 1996: 106).

The continuing concealment of identity on the 'passing stage' of heterosexuality is induced by fear of another person discovering the truth. It may also be the result of a covert self-hatred: 'The fear of exposure, of living a life that can be collapsed at any moment, forces one to be always 'on': to plot, to plan, to devise strategies of disguise and withdrawal' (Babuscio, 1988: 39). Having to mask one's sexual orientation leads not only to permanent anxiety but the formation of two distinct identities: 'Such a schizophrenia of the human sensibility takes a heavy toll on the psychic state of the passer. Deceit of this kind quickly becomes a way of life, and the gay person emerges as one who is for ever alert to aspects of a social situation which others will treat as routine' (Babuscio, 1988: 39-40).[100]

Concealment borne of fear inevitably leads to alienation and loneliness, integral parts of what McNeill calls 'the painful experience of being an exile' (McNeill 1996: 3). Fortunato sees exile as the place 'where we find ourselves when we are who we are'

[100] One of the best illustrations of this is the gay character of Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, a film by Anthony Minghella (2000), based on the novel by Patricia Highsmith. It explores the psychological and physical repercussions of disguise created by Ripley's utter lack of self-esteem which leads him to murder three men. Towards the end of the film Ripley remarks: 'I'm going to be stuck in the basement, aren't I, that's my, that's my – terrible and alone and dark – and I've lied about who I am, and where I am, and so nobody can ever find me … I suppose I always thought – better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody (Minghella 2000: 140). Many homosexuals, fearful of their true sexual identity being revealed, perhaps even disguising it through marriage, might relate to such a self-image.

(Fortunato. 1982: 17). The major components of the wound are common to all people: 'The denial of our gayness for some period. The questioning of our faith. The seeming irreconcilability of our sexual and spiritual selves. The schizophrenia. The feelings of unworthiness. The guilt. The loneliness. The hiding. The closets. And the sense of being on the fringes, cut off, banished' (Fortunato, 1982: 17).

Giblin argues that, in leading the community at prayer, a priest is representing gospel values or what it is to be a good person. For any minister, this leads to ' a keen sense of the gap between what one is really and what one proclaims. In a real sense one is always a sinner and can never fully be what one proclaims' (Giblin, 2001). Since its early days, Giblin notes, the Church has been clear that the grace given through liturgy is offered by Christ irrespective of the virtue or lack of virtue of the celebrant. However, this has not been the only message: clericalism as a more general phenomenon places great value on the explicit visibility of the priest as a witness to the Gospel. The common perception, which can be traced back to the Scriptures, is that the priest should be a model of virtue. For the gay priest, then, to the extent that he is homophobic about his own gayness, he will experience 'a great deal of dissonance' between his public 'virtuous' persona and who he is in himself. A key element in dealing with dissonance is 'coming out' or allowing one's gayness to become self-available, as Nouwen put it. But Giblin believes

> this self-availability can only really happen through coming out in some key inter-personal contexts in one's life. Sexuality is relational and so therefore is our sexual identity. We cannot give it to ourselves by prayer, reflection, reading, writing or willpower, Nouwen illustrates this so well, after all he knew he was gay as a boy but only began to come out to others and himself as a mature man, and then never did so fully (Giblin, 2001).

Giblin's point is that it is only by sharing their sexuality with a friend, spiritual director, sibling or parent that gay people can really know themselves to be acceptable in their gayness. But he warns that it is precisely that necessary coming-out process that is made so much more fearful by the public liturgical role that many priests have. To the extent that congregations, fellow clergy or bishops are themselves homophobic, priests who come out will raise fears of scandal and even prejudice their opportunities to serve:

> One is exposed – stretched between dissonance and disaster. These, perhaps, are the stakes Nouwen lived at a degree of extreme visibility. It all points to the need for honesty and openness towards gay ministers in the Church. At least if one can talk and be oneself in some contexts, then the dissonance can be normalised and not dramatised in an unhealthy and unnatural way. That was Nouwen's salvation in the dark hours (Giblin, 2001). [101]

Disowned in many instances by family, society and the church, homosexuals often internalise their sense of banishment and rejection, and become outcasts, victims of prejudice, discrimination and oppression. Regardless of their talents, gifts and love, they find themselves forced to the margins by coming to terms with something they already are. As Sullivan points out, the homosexual experience may be classified as an illness, disorder, privilege or curse; it may be deemed worthy of a "cure", corrected, embraced or endured. But it exists – independently of the forms of its expression. It is 'bound up in that mysterious and unstable area where sexual desire and emotional longing meet; it reaches into the core of what makes a human being who he or she is (Sullivan, 1995: 17).

The marginalisation of gay people leaves many of them at an impasse, struggling with their self-worth and self-image. Empereur says they often feel a failure, living in constant fear, depending on their role in society or employment. The feeling of rejection and lack of assurance 'is not merely something imagined. It is often their daily experience' (Empereur, 1998: 49). These 'experiences of limit' lead many to seek spiritual direction. Empereur's work in this area reveals that gays at all stages of direction find that marginalisation and suffering 'are relevant to their self-development as human beings in the context of faith. And for many of them these

[101]Father Tom Giblin, SJ, is director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin. He is also a member of The Gathering, a confidential group for gay Catholic priests. In September 2001, the group discussed Nouwen's struggles and related them to their own experiences. Their conversations led to a consideration of performance and ministry. They recognised that, like Nouwen, many of them were good performers which left them feeling empty and fragile afterwards. Father Giblin commented: 'One's self is extended like a stretched skin to embrace the crowd and then can collapse back afterwards. I used to feel it much more before I really came out. Being gay, at least for some, also gives a desire to perform. Hiding something inside leads to a need to express oneself outside more successfully – to be accepted and affirmed by the crowd. It also gives a sensitivity to some for the colour and aesthetics that make liturgy work. Yet, at the same time, having our gayness as a secret, as is the case for several members of the group, makes it hard to let the affirmation which greets our liturgical engagement seep into our inner selves. One can be left with the feeling that it was not me, or with the thought 'if only they knew.' In a way it is the image of the sad clown. Is there ministry without performance? No, not really. But especially in performing, there has to be a healthy connection between the inner and outer persons' (Giblin, 2001).

negative experiences are the reasons they come to direction in the first place because they are real experiences of the dark night' (Empereur, 1998: 51). Empereur notes that gay people who have been stripped of their dignity and find themselves alone are often reluctant to look deeper into the pain of their vulnerability through spiritual direction believing they will see 'nothing but fear' (Empereur 1998: 56). It may be that they are already confronting the inner darkness and, because they are terrified, they seek help.

Most gay directees, according to Empereur, experience suffering in their lives, sometimes associated with the absence of a relationship or a former lover, or with issues concerning parents, friends at work, lack of community support or feeling the need for some significant intimacy. The suffering may also reveal an absence of God in their lives but is often the result of prejudice and the misconceptions people have about lesbians and gays. Empereur talks about the gay person's 'passage through suffering' and admits he sees 'no way of avoiding the suffering that comes from being a person "not like others."' (Empereur, 1998: 69). Being gay and lesbian, he argues, can only threaten those whose identity is tied to certain ways of acting and living, to rules of conduct which must be followed and who operate according to fixed stereotypes of what it means to be masculine and feminine. For some men, the presence of gay males is 'profoundly disturbing ... But it still hurts a gay man to know that he threatens other men when he does not intend to and in fact would like to have a harmonious relationship with these men' (Empereur, 1998: 69).

Alienation often gives rise to anger and its repressed form, depression. McNeill argues that just as pain follows a physical wound, so anger (or psychic pain) occurs when people feel they are being treated unjustly. At a time of virulent homophobia by religious leaders, he says, there has been legitimate rage in the gay and lesbian community against the human and fallible church. At a time of AIDS, this anger has been projected on to God: 'Insofar as our experience of our sexual orientation is negative, as long as we see it as sinful, sick, or evil, we experience a deep crisis in our relationship with God and real anger at God' (McNeill, 1996: 38). McNeill says that if gay people accept the 'blasphemous proposition' that AIDS is God's punishment for being gay, then rage against a sadistic God, who creates homosexuals, then punishes them, may be justly felt. He states that at the heart of all

gay spiritual life is a process of 'mourning and accepting our status as exiles in the world,' something doubly difficult to embrace for anyone living with AIDS (McNeill, 1996: 38)

Releasing the Gift

The masks of denial, fear and alienation, which result in lives of anxiety, insecurity and marginality, cannot be considered anything other than destructive. As Woods points out, any form of suffering is not intrinsically creative. It can only be made creative – and therefore redemptive – by being accepted without reservation as a sign of compassion and solidarity. Ultimately, he argues, suffering can acquire meaning only because it is creative and can be assumed into a richer experience of life. 'And only a profound *love* can make suffering creative and redemptive. This is the mystery revealed in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and made effective for us all in his resurrection as the Christ' (Woods, 1988: 178).[102]

For Woods, the meaning of homosexual experience is the creativity of suffering made possible by deep love, a suffering which is overcome through love not avoided. 'Suffering must be gone *through*, not around' (Woods, 1988: 178). This is precisely what Nouwen ascertained during his long spells of depression and loneliness. It is through Nouwen's relentless spirituality of forging light out of darkness, of turning negatives into prints, of discovering dancing through mourning, that gay people can empower both themselves and their churches.

[102] It is, of course, not only gay Christians who have to reconcile their sexuality with their spirituality. People of all faiths face similar challenges in owning the gift. The chairman of the Manchester Buddhist Centre, Mokshapriya, discovered his homosexuality through the practice of meditation. 'An area of my life that I was unhappy about and had pushed away for many years was suddenly right there at the forefront of my mind, insisting on acknowledgement and action. I had to make a choice between giving up meditation altogether or facing the painful issue head-on. Meditation had brought to consciousness the most important issue in my life. I realised how much energy had been invested holding this secret at bay. My meditation practice took me to new depths as more and more energy was integrated I got to know myself more and more deeply and that process of discovery continues on ever subtler levels' (Mokshapriya, 2001).

Harank believes the homosexual Christian community is reaching a stage where, out of its suffering, especially through the AIDS pandemic, it is beginning to regain its confidence and express the creative, healthy and integrated masks that sexuality can foster within a community: 'We are about to paint new masks of compassion and solidarity, connecting the suffering of gay people with other people who are marginalised and ostracised. There are ways in which we can create masks that bring out those dimensions of a redeemed, incarnational life, of being able to be willing to be naked in the body as the Body of Christ but also by using a mask (as so many tribal rituals do) to reveal the essence of who we are as God's children, hands, feet, heart and eyes in this world. New masks, acknowledging the purpose of our humanity, create an environment where justice, reconciliation, co-operation and compassion are possible' (Harank, 2000).

Harank thinks it is absolutely essential for gay people to own and receive the gift of sexuality if they are to relate to others in a way that brings a sense of intimacy: 'If you keep that source of passion, that source of creativity, that *eros* out of everything else, then you are really left with a version of *agape*. This is a very important form of love but unfortunately takes on an abstract quality when the *eros* dimension of love is not claimed as a gift (Harank, 1997).

For Alison, the question is not why are there so many gays in the church but why does God love gay people so much? God calls people to love vulnerably, he argues, and some of those people are gay. Because they start from a vulnerable patch, it may even be easier for them than for others. People who are liminal, finding themselves under threat of marginalisation, are forced to survive in other and more creative ways. It can be a gift or a burden depending how it is taken up (Alison, 2000).

But how should the word 'gift' be interpreted in a spiritual sense? If homosexuality per se has received so much condemnation from official religious bodies and homosexuals themselves have suffered so unremittingly, how could any claim be made that this way of being, this way of loving, could be a charism for the church? The Greek word *charisma* is a verbal noun from the verb, *charidzomai* which can be translated literally as 'to bestow a gift or favour'. It has been interpreted as a free gift, a spiritual capacity resulting from God's grace (*charis*) Koenig notes that it is

Paul who first gives charisma a religious meaning and associates it with a variety of special gifts which include the Spirit itself in a specific manifestation, changes in physical conditions and/or emotional states, talents both ordinary and extraordinary. They are all consciously received as a gift from God Charisma indicates the total gift of salvation received by all believers (Rom 5:15-16), a primal blessing of the Spirit dwelling in everyone but not owned by them. Additionally, each person receives a particular gift from God (1 Cor 7:7, 17; 12:7) which should be used for the benefit of others 'so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 4: 10-11) (Koenig in Downey, 1993: 140).

Malatesta draws attention to the fact that the endurance of suffering can itself be a special gift (2 Cor 4: 7-12; Phil 1:29; Col 1:24; Jn 18:11). God entrusted Jesus with the work of enduring his passion and death for the salvation of the world. What 'effected in us the gift of reconciliation with God and with one another was a gift to Jesus. When we are called to share in his passion and death and thus witness to God's saving work and mediate its effectiveness, we are being offered a most precious gift'. According to Malatesta, the one who bears the gift must continue to exercise it for the good of God's people 'and wait patiently for the moment of greater acceptance, if that is to come' (Malatesta in Downey, 1993: 140 –141) This may take longer than the bearer of the gift would prefer but, as Bermejo puts it: 'Long-enduring patience in face of protracted opposition is one of the qualities of the true charismatic' (Malatesta in Downey, 1993: 141).

In Greek the words *charisma* (gift), *charis* (grace) and *chara* (joy) share the same root. Malatesta makes the point that joy, thanksgiving and praise (because of God's gracious gifts) characterise the New Testament communities. These attitudes, he says, should be marks of Christian discipleship in any age and should build up the communities (in Downey, 1993: 141).

Shinnick argues that, despite the limitations of Vatican teaching on homosexuality, the dialogue taking place has revealed an understanding of homosexuality that accepts it as a gift: 'It is indeed *a remarkable gift*, because against all the odds – in the face of civil penalties, medical labels of illness, and church classification of sin – gay men and lesbian women have emerged from a gloomy and ignorant age

recognising and honouring their own dignity and worth. Such people will no longer hide in some closet. They are taking their place confidently in the church and in society. They are part of the church, part of the Body of Christ, a gift to the community – bringing particular qualities and insights, not in spire of, but because of, their gayness' (Shinnick, 1997: xxii).

The Second Vatican Council called the Catholic Church to engage itself in the most extensive dialogue on the issues of the day in the search for truth, a dialogue to be characterised by humility, respect and charity. Shinnick says Pope John Paul II himself sees the capacity for dialogue rooted in the nature and dignity of a person and as an indispensable step long the path towards human self-realisation, the self-realisation both of each individual and of every human community. So important and profound is this dialogue, argues Shinnick, that it is not simply an exchange of ideas but in some ways always an 'exchange of gifts' (Shinnick, 1997: 8). He says the dialogue is not about winners and losers but about constructing a way forward so people can exchange those gifts. 'If the goal of the dialogue is "that they help one another in the search for truth", then we have diffused the adversarial element. If the dialogue is a promotion of "all that is true, just, holy, all that is worthy of love", then it will be a conversion experience for us all' (Shinnick, 1997: 125).

Countryman and Ritley argue that gay and lesbian Christians are 'gifted by otherness'.[103] Rather than trying to justify their existence to the majority heterosexual community within the church, they should not shirk from speaking from their own experiences. They see the stories of lesbian and gay Christians as 'the enriching of the community's fabric'. They help to enlarge the tent's borders and to claim a separate and legitimate identity, not as flawed heterosexuals, but as 'God's gay people, God's gay tribe, bearing gifts the church truly needs, even when it least wants them' (Countryman and Ritley, 2001: 16). Their love and desire should not be a problem for the church, but a gift of grace: 'Being gay is not a sin, nor a sickness, but God's gift to us' (Countryman and Ritley, 2001: 28).

[103] The title of their book, published by Morehouse in 2001. Countryman and Ritley are Episcopalians.

It was Pope John Paul II who said: 'I state from the outset: "Be not afraid!" This is the same exhortation that resounded at the beginning of my ministry in the See of Saint Peter ...Of what should we not be afraid? We should not fear the truth about ourselves' (in Sullivan, 1995: 19). Sullivan notes that in the 1980s Rome rejected suggestions of some Protestants and old-style Catholics that homosexuals were incapable of love. It taught unequivocally the inherent dignity of homosexual persons and the need to respect them in a way which did not reduce their identity to sex alone. The Church never denied that the human capacity and need for love was part of homosexual life. In the 1990s, Sullivan explains, American catholic bishops went further and spoke of the importance for parents of homosexual children to accept and love them ' as a gift of God; and [to accept] the full truth of God's revelation about the dignity of the human person and the meaning of human sexuality. Asks Sullvan: 'If homosexuals were gifts of God, then how exactly were they incapable of love? And why was their sexuality intrinsically separable from the capacity for intimacy?' (Sullivan, 1998: 48).

Shinnick believes the turning point in moving from having negative attitudes about 'the gay self' to a sense that one's homosexuality is a gift comes through the experience of being loved by, and then invited to return love to, another: 'Opening oneself to the loving touch of another is an authentic journey to the God of love' (Shinnick, 1997: 27). He says that, without this human love, a relationship with God can become one of obedience and respect but also one that ultimately lacks passion and love. This is probably overstating it but he makes a more convincing point when he argues that if spirituality is the life of the Divine Spirit within each person, then it is also the realisation of the presence of a gift for others. He quotes Paul who told his co-worker Timothy that 'God's gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, and love and self-control' (2 Tim 1: 7).

Boyd sees in the gay experience God's gifts: 'the capacity to love, the capacity for a deep sensitivity, the capacity for service' (Shinnick, 1997: 128). Ritley argues that 'gay is a spiritual quality,' conferring on people a separation which she understands as 'right'. The gift also bestows a certain spirit of commitment to a task, as well as detachment at its completion (in Shinnick, 1997: 128).

However, in order for homosexuals to own these gifts, to become wounded lovers and healers in the church, it may be necessary for them to enter into the 'coming out' process which releases them from their burdens of guilt and shame, or to use Nouwen's words, opens the wound to a level where it can be shared. This can be achieved only after an inner move towards self-acceptance which in turn can lead to a more mature life of self-giving, according to James and Evelyn Whitehead. These lay theologians argue that the church should assist gay people to embrace their sexuality through a series of rites of passage blessings. For as long as the church refuses such possibilities, it denies 'the larger community the benefits of the religious gifts and insights with which its gay members have been graced' (quoted in Shinnick, 1997: 72). Human sexuality has more to do with fruitfulness than fertility, they maintain. They dismiss the notion that spontaneous impulses of arousal and affection (the 'inclination' of the 1986 Vatican document) of lesbians and gay men are unnatural and detect within them the energetic roots of human love which are 'part of the gift of creation, a sign of God's delight in our bodies' (in Shinnick, 1997: 72).

Fortunato, writing about the healing journeys of gay Christians, suggests, however, that marginality itself is often the outcome of gay people accepting their sexuality as a gift. It is a matter of exile: 'To be gay and Christian, integrating both into the wholeness we deep down know ourselves to be, to embrace them both as gifts of God, and to live our lives authentically, rejoicing in those gifts as part of the uniqueness that makes us who we are is to place ourselves on the outskirts of the community we most care about ... We come bearing gifts that aren't welcome' (Fortunato, 1982: 17). But for Fortunato it doesn't end there. Loving and sharing anyway, embracing the exile, giving gifts when nobody wants them he argues, demands a profound belief that not only can life on the fringes be endured by gay people but that being banished can be viewed as 'an incredible spiritual opportunity' (Fortunato, 1982: 18). Living in the face of utter rejection means following some of the most painful footsteps of Jesus Christ. Loving in the face of persecution may not always yield peace and happiness, he contends, but it may be the only response that allows homosexuals to make any sense of their lives:

> For gay Christians to be able to love, give, and find meaning in a world that rejects and isolates them, the cruel gash separating their sexuality from their spirituality must be healed. Their freedom to love and give in a hostile world hinges upon their coming to believe in their wholeness and in their having a rightful place in God's universe (Fortunato, 1982: 18).

Harank says that, while he would not call Nouwen's books 'gay texts', they were the means through which he tried to explore the myriad of emotions that gay people experience on their journey to coming-out. Harank believes that, towards the end of his life, Nouwen was at the beginning of understanding the coming-out process as a spiritual, sacramental process. He understood 'in some very deep ways' the sacramental nature of humanity but the institutional priesthood constricted him. He had, Harank suggests, to deal with the fear of coming out and proclaiming part of who he was in the context of Catholicism and an environment 'that can be and often was hostile and violent in its language towards sexuality and particularly queer sexuality'. Sexuality, Harank argues, is a broken body in the life of the church and Nouwen, through his presence among physically broken people, began to see that he had to acknowledge the broken part of his body – his sexuality - which was 'bone-marrow deep' (Harank, 2000).

Monette argues that, towards the end of his life, Nouwen came to accept his homosexuality as a gift: 'The greatest struggle of his life … was how to be loving as a gay human being… Never once did this renowned spiritual guide speak of gayness as sin, as something to be saved from. He grew to love his gayness as a gifted path to intimacy.' [104]

Connected with the eventual acceptance of the gift was the movement for Nouwen from resentment to gratitude. His ministry among the disabled helped him realise this. 'Gratitude is to receive the gift of others and to discover them as real gifts for you. People with mental handicaps and the assistants allow me to see life as gift and particularly when life is so fragile' (Nouwen, 1992: BBC).

[104] From a letter Monette circulated to gay friends after Nouwen's death.

Gratitude and giftedness are connected in Gula's work on spirituality and the moral life. Using the Book of Genesis as evidence, Gula argues that dignity comes from a person's relationship with God. To say a person is sacred is to acknowledge that their worth or dignity is a gift from God. A first principle of the moral life, therefore, is that humankind's 'inherent, inalienable, and inviolable' dignity is not dependent on personal achievement or social attributes, but is a gift of divine love (Gula, 1999: 12). Human dignity is the fundamental basis of all morality in the sense that it is incumbent on Christians to 'build up one another' by mutually attributing dignity, esteem and value, helping people claim for themselves what is already theirs.

To be made in the image of God is not only a gift but a responsibility: 'We are called as images of God to live out the fullness of the gifts we have received. Receiving and giving are the dynamic movement of morality and spirituality' (Gula, 1999: 19). People are first loved through the blessings of God which are their gifts. They are then called to love by living out these blessings in imitation of the love they have been given (John 13: 34). Graced with the virtues of humility and gratitude, they are able to accept that what comes their way or is released in them is a gift and not an achievement. Instead of reacting with defensiveness or even violence, people can give freely what they have been blessed with. What has been received as a gift can be given as a gift.

As Kelly reminds us, when homosexuality is viewed in such a positive way, it becomes a critical dimension of how lesbians and gay men respond to their sense of vocation. It needs, therefore, to be located within the general context of Christian morality which poses a challenge to Christian Ethics: 'It is possible that a radical reappraisal might be needed if it is to be able to accommodate a positive appreciation of homosexuality. Some people may respond to this suggestion with dismay, believing that this means yet another stage in what they see as a lowering of moral standards. However, if our more positive version of homosexuality is really true, it should follow a sexual ethics which is able to justice to this, should be all the more richer since it is now constructed on the basis of [a] more comprehensive picture of the giftedness of the human person (Kelly, 1998: 91).

All these insights are important for this study because they underline the need for gay people to accept their sexuality as a gift – but also to be aware of the responsibilities which come with it. They suggest also that the institutional church, whose own teachings on homosexuality have been described in this thesis as defensive and violent, should re-consider its thinking. The absence of reflective thinking on homosexuality in Nouwen's writings was most likely due to the fact that he was unable to receive his sexuality as a gift through which he could explicitly build up the community as an openly homosexual priest.

7

THE VOCATION OF BEING GAY

In the previous chapter, I analysed ways in which homosexuality had been viewed as a wound and showed how it might be claimed as a gift for the good of the church. This final chapter will explore what Nouwen might have meant when he described gay people as having a 'unique vocation' in the Christian community, something he had concluded during the middle period of his life (Nouwen, *My History with God*). There was, however, no elaboration and Nouwen leaves us guessing. As I have already shown, in *Sabbatical Journey* he states that homosexuality is a blessing and my research uncovered the fact that he once told a lesbian Catholic that her sexuality should be received as such. Intriguingly, Ross points out that, in the English language, the word 'wound' and the word 'blessing' have the same root: 'Our wounds are ultimately our greatest source of blessing because they become one with the wounds of our humble God' (Ross, undated: xxiv).[105] This chapter, then, will examine the notion of 'gay vocation' with reference to a number of Catholic thinkers, some of whom write from a gay perspective. I shall show how their specific vision of queer theology mirrors Nouwen's more general writings on the spiritual life.

Icons

In Nouwen's book, *Here and Now*, he reflects on how his experience at L'Arche has put him in touch with 'reversals' as signs of God's spirit: 'The poor have a mission to the rich, the handicapped have a mission to the 'normal,' the gay people have a mission to the straight, the dying have a mission to the living. Those whom the world has made into victims God has chosen to be bearers of good news' (Nouwen, 1994e: 45).

[105] It is linguistically interesting to note that the French also use the phrase 'Les blessés' when referring to 'The wounded'. It is commonly employed in newspaper headlines over reports of accidents and violent attacks.

Ritley speaks in a similar vein about 'the vocation of being gay.' Lesbians and gay men are

> called to be gay icons for one another and for every other man and woman in the world, windows through which God's working in the world is glimpsed and finally grasped. Specifically, we are naturally icons of the spiritual life for others, gay or otherwise. Our lives, our journeys, and our very natures gifted us for it (Countryman and Ritley, 2001: 152).

Ritley, an Episcopalian, argues that until the Christian Church officially grants lesbians and gay men saints of their own, they must be icons for one another, bearing one another's faith and pride.[106] God's gay tribe, she says, are called to cross a different wilderness and to witness to a different kind of freedom. But as Nouwen was all too aware, such openness is hard to claim for lesbian and gay Catholics who find an official spirituality laid out for them in the ethical texts of the Magisterium which views homosexuality as a moral disorder. Here I want to focus primarily on a critique of a gay Catholic priest. 'Father Jon Young' believes homosexuality and holiness are not incompatible and thinks Vatican teaching has had a detrimental effect on homosexual Catholics in preventing them from building up the Body of Christ: 'Rather than seeing the spiritual life as the response to a divine calling which we then try to integrate into the whole of our lives, for the homosexual there appear to be ethical prerequisites, acceptance of which is a *sine qua non* for a Catholic spirituality. Whether this impression is actually correct is another matter, but for many lesbian and gay Catholics, their relationship with God appears to be conditional rather than absolute' (Young, 1999).[107]

The Magisterium

The nine-page, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986) lays out specific guidelines for the spiritual lives of homosexual persons which are dependent on the ethical analysis it also contains. The letter reaffirms the negative judgement of earlier documents on homosexual acts such

[106] Robert Lentz has produced an icon of Henri Nouwen for a gay couple in Toronto.

[107] The priest requested a pseudonym. His views have not been published.

as *Persona Humana* (1975); and to counter an 'overly benign' interpretation of its teaching, it says:

> Although the particular inclination of the homosexual is not a sin, it is a more or less a strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.[108]

The document recognises that homosexuals can be generous and giving of themselves but homosexual activity is seen neither as a complementary union, nor an opportunity to transmit life. For homosexuals to engage in sexual acts is to confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent. Young concludes that, with its emphasis on the ethical dimensions of being homosexual, the Catholic Church offers a spirituality of being good rather than a spirituality based on being human:

> The spirituality offered by the Magisterium and those who model themselves on it appears to be one in which not only spiritual growth, but almost the possibility of a spiritual life, is dependent on acceptance of the Church's stance, even if the appropriation might be gradual. With such degrees of negativity this approach gives the *prima facie* impression of being dualist and spiritually and psychologically unhealthy (Young, 1999).[109]

Young questions how helpful the Vatican distinction between act and orientation is. While perceived as part of 'tradition,' it is in fact a 20th century theological construct open to challenge: 'The distinction between orientation and act presumes that once sexual desire is quarantined and contained, the homosexual is just like anyone else.

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[108] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, Vatican Polygot Press, Vatican City, 1986. art. 17.

[109] Pastoral programmes, based on the Church's teaching, such as those run in America by Father John Harvey, emphasise moral behaviour. With the support of bishops. Father Harvey and others set up an organisation, Courage, to offer group support to homosexuals seeking to free themselves from a gay lifestyle to which they felt addicted. Its goals are to live chastely, dedicate their lives to Christ through the service of others, prayer, spiritual reading, spiritual direction, and frequent reception of Penance and the Eucharist; to foster a spirit of fellowship and to live lives that may serve as good examples to other homosexuals. Harvey believes the homosexual person is bound to celibacy. While some have found this approach to provide a healthy spirituality, concerns have been expressed that members are encouraged to undergo therapy to seek a heterosexual orientation. Most writers on homosexuality from a Catholic perspective, including Nouwen, have doubted the benefits or integrity of reorientation therapy.

This terribly naïve presumption does much damage to persons both in their lives and in their deaths' (Young, 1999).

Such a distinction seems highly reductionist, he argues. By focusing on the morality of individual acts and by condemning them, the purpose of spirituality is presented as the means by which one remains ethically pure, or returns to purity. In making such a blanklet condemnation, homosexuality cannot be viewed in the context of relationships, life choices, conscience and spirituality. By focusing on moral acts *in se*, the Church is unable to distinguish between good gay sex and bad gay sex, sex which is spiritually uplifting and sex which is spirituality harmful. In the eyes of the Vatican, homosexual sex is always wrong. The official approach acknowledges the need for friendship so long as occasions of sin are avoided:

> The requirement of continence and the expectation of failure (contained in frequent references to the Sacrament of Penance and pastoral sensitivity) have combined to create a spirituality dominated by sin and the need to avoid, or perhaps limit, moral failure. Whilst any truly Catholic spirituality must be aware of human weakness and moral failure, it is hard to imagine any other group in the Church which has had a *via negativa* imposed on it. How spiritually and psychologically healthy is this sort of spirituality? (Young, 1999).

Young argues that the church needs to take more account of human experience. While this is important for theology and ethics, it is indispensable for Christian spirituality if a body-spirit dualism is to be avoided: 'The Roman Catholic Church judges homosexual acts to be intrinsically evil and the orientation itself to be objectively disordered. The deficiencies of the spirituality which has been based on this judgement lead me to conclude that, thus far at least, the Roman Catholic Church is offering a disordered spirituality to its lesbian and gay members' (Young, 1999).

Although traditional church teaching employs negative language with regard to homosexuality, it is important to note that *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* includes a positive four-column entry on the matter, written by Father John McNeill. Appearing to justify this in the introduction, the editor, Michael Downey, explains that spirituality is concerned with the human person in relation to God. What differentiates it from systematic theology or moral theology is the

dynamic and concrete character of the relationship of the human person to God in actual situations from daily life. The relationship 'is one of development, of growth in the life of faith, thus and covers the whole of life' (Downey, 1993: viii-ix).

The entry includes references to Jung rather than Ratzinger. In heightened contrast to the current teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, Jung in his own time concluded that homosexuality and religious feelings were closely compatible. While it is true that he regarded homosexuality as an unpathological form of immaturity, he certainly would never have considered it a disorder. Indeed, as a therapist, he recognised, within the homosexual, spiritual qualities of sensitivity, beauty, educational leadership and religious sensibility, all of which find particular resonance in the life and spirituality of Nouwen:

> [Homosexuality] gives him a quiet capacity for friendship, which often creates ties of astonishing tenderness between men and may even rescue friendship between the sexes from the limbo of the impossible. He may have good taste and an aesthetic sense which are fostered by the presence of a feminine streak. Then he may be supremely gifted as a teacher because of his almost feminine insight and tact. He is likely to have a feeling for history and to be conservative in the best sense and cherish the values of the past. Often he is endowed with a wealth of religious feelings, which help to bring the *ecclesia spiritualis* into reality; and a spiritual receptivity which makes him responsive to revelation (Jung, 1959: 86-87).

Spiritual Receptivity

The notion of receptivity is at the core of all relational life in Nouwen's spirituality and would be fundamental in any appropriation of his work specifically for gay Christians. Callahan, who made a comparative study of receptivity according both to Nouwen and the Jungian analyst, Ann Belford Ulanov, understands receptivity as a compassionate acceptance of oneself and others, putting people in relationship with God; it implies enabling and waiting, and calls for openness and change.[110] Although Nouwen did not always seem to show compassion towards his own being, Callahan notes that he writes widely about compassion as a 'feminine' attitude of receptivity, a Christian attitude of heart. His view of ministry as hospitality suggests openness in

[110] Annice Callahan, *Receptivity According to Ann Belford Ulanov and Henri Nouwen*, Spiritual Life, 38/1 (Spring 1992), pp. 33-44.

relationships: to receive the stranger as guest is to allow the stranger to become the host (Callahan, *Receptivity*, p. 33).

Ulanov's 'feminine elements of being,' argues Callahan, are observable in Nouwen's spirituality of solitude (as a mirror experience of God, affirming people in the truth of their being and their belonging to God), reaching out in hospitality (not only to others but as a receiving of the other's true self) and his understanding of home (as a place where people feel grounded in love, not fear). What Ulanov calls 'the birth of otherness' is detectable in Nouwen's writings where he talks about the importance of finding anchor places for our lives in our own centres so 'we can let others enter into the space created for them' (Callahan, *Receptivity*, p. 35). Her discussions on inner authority find resonance in Nouwen's thinking on compassion which is born of solitude where people can discover that the roots of violence and sin lie within the human heart as our illusions of self-righteousness are unmasked (Callahan, *Receptivity,* p. 37). Inner authority has to do with the 'feminine' ability to operate in a connected way, displayed through Nouwen's thinking about the care which springs from compassion and creates community through the ability to forgive, accept vulnerability and share the fellowship of the weak: 'Solidarity and consolation do not lead to commiseration, shared complaint, paralyzing pity or sobbing on one another's shoulders. Rather, they point to that community in which we give strength to another by confessing our weakness to one another and receiving one another's pains' (Callahan, Receptivity, pp. 38-39). Nouwen draws strength to accept suffering from the broken heart of Jesus, the compassionate God (Callahan, *Receptivity*, p. 39).

Ulanov's ideas of 'receptivity to presence,' says Callahan, are reflected in Nouwen's writings on the incarnation and solitude, hospitality and prayer as centering points which enable us to be present to ourselves, to others and to God (Callahan, *Receptivity*, p. 39). He believes people minister best once they have recognised their own needs and have tended to their own wounds. The acknowledgement and attention to wounds resource ministry. Hearts can be receptive to the pain of others only to the extent that people receive their own pain into their own hearts. The process of acknowledging pain is already the process of compassionate action. Like Ulanov, Nouwen uses the vocabulary of receptivity, availability and vulnerability:

'When someone accepts a gift, he admits another into his world and is ready to give him a place in his own being' (Nouwen, 1989a: 62).

Callahan argues that Nouwen is sympathetic to a feminine way of knowing, which she characterises as relational, intuitive, immediate and personal (like New Testament women who know Jesus): 'His spirituality and theology are basically experiential. He reflects only on what he has experienced and integrated. He does not talk about ministry and prayer in the abstract, but as they are concretely experienced by himself and others. His can be called a "connected" way of knowing, generally regarded as feminine' (Callahan, *Receptivity*, p. 41).[111]

McNeill believes he identified strongly on the spiritual level with Nouwen because he was so in touch with the feminine in himself. This is why gay people find an affinity with his writings (McNeill, 2001). McNeill argues that the world 'desperately needs' to bring about a synthesis of the masculine and feminine. The gay and lesbian community is making that happen – that is its main contribution to the *ecclesia spiritualis*. McNeill advocates that the church and society must witness to deep bonds of love which exist between gay men and between lesbians, and to deep bonds of loving friendship between gay men and their lesbian sisters: 'We must model a kind of love based on equality and respect for each other as equal subjects and no longer based on dominance and submission' (McNeill, 1995: 181).

Alluding to Jung's observation that gay men have an aesthetic sensitivity to beauty, McNeill believes they can guide humanity towards a deeper appreciation of aesthetic values. Many of the great creators of art, sculpture, music, architecture and drama have come from the gay community. Noting Jung's view that gay people are often gifted teachers because of their feminine insight and tact, McNeill says this accounts for the large number of homosexuals drawn to service roles: 'The gift of compassion

[111] Such a notion of receptivity is also discernible in the work of the Trappist monk, Matthew Kelty, who writes about a 'special spiritual' quality in his life as a hermit and contemplative which he attributes to his homosexuality. Kelty's point is that homosexuals are more closely related to the 'anima' than is usual: 'The man with a strong anima will always experience some inadequacy until he comes to terms with his inner spirit and establishes communion – no small achievement' (as quoted by McNeill in Downey, 1993: 504).

is one of the gifts many gay men receive almost simultaneously with their gayness' (McNeill, 1995: 181).

McNeill also argues that 'the final division' that must be overcome is the division between male and female. When this happens, 'we can become one with the feminine and masculine in ourselves' (McNeill, 1995 192). Gay spiritual communities are being called by God to play a cornerstone role, he maintains. In order to respond to their vocation, they have to overcome fear and 'come out':

> Gays must model in a very public way their ability to balance the masculine and feminine dimensions within themselves, their ability to put together genuine human love for each other with a deep spiritual life, and their deep awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their life. They must become, therefore, "candles on the hilltop" for everyone to see (McNeill, 1995: 193).

Gay people, then, might be said to have a natural propensity towards the intuitive and spiritual life which would seem to contradict Vatican teaching that their lives have less virtuous tendencies. Given that homosexuals are often endowed with a religious temperament which helps bring about the *ecclesia spiritualis*, it is reasonable to re-envisage an 'ordered' spirituality for the gay community, drawing on some of Nouwen's writings which bear all the hallmarks of Jung's perceptions (sensitivity, beauty, compassion, a sense of history and receptivity). The irony is that, while Nouwen writes from his point of suffering as a gay priest and creates a spirituality for all people, homosexuals are now taking these same universal 'ideas of the holy' and applying them back to their own lives. This is part of Nouwen's paradox:

> Nouwen had an extraordinary share in the suffering of loneliness and depression, his own crucifixion, his own dark night of the soul. This had something to do with his gayness. Our greatest wound is always interiorised self-rejection and fear that we are not loved by God. Nouwen's spirituality spoke in a special way to gay experience. But it also has a universal resonance for all who search for an intimate relationship of love with God (McNeill, 2001).

Wells of Experience

McNeill argues that the painful experience of being an exile from family, church and culture can create a particular spirituality among gay people, not unlike the liberation spirituality expounded by Gutiérrez in his book *We Drink from Our Own Wells,* an

expression of St Bernard of Clairvaux which queer theologians have used when describing the need to construct a spirituality based on their own experience. Gutiérrez describes how the unique experience of suffering by the poor in the Third World gives rise to a particular type of spirituality, like living water springing up from the very depths of the experience of faith. As Nouwen himself writes in the foreword:

> To drink from your own well is to live your own life in the Spirit of Jesus as you have encountered him in your concrete historical reality. This has nothing to do with abstract opinions, convictions, or ideas, but it has everything to do with the tangible, audible, and visible experience of God, an experience so real that it can become the foundation of a life project (in Gutiérrez, 1984: xiv).

McNeill argues that to drink from your own well means reflecting on a unique personal encounter with God, not an experience mediated through family or church. A comparison, he suggests, can be made with the 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits' in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola who claimed that God is in continuous personal dialogue with those seeking the divine presence. God speaks principally through our feelings rather than our minds, he says, and therefore the spiritual life and its development depend on our being able to discern these feelings, to trust them and allow them to guide us as part of an ongoing individual and communal discernment.[112]

While Nouwen is clearly referring to the spiritual journey of peoples exiled through oppression and poverty, he goes on to state that the spirituality of liberation touches every dimension of life. God's saving act in history penetrates all levels of human existence: 'God is seen here as the God of the living who enters into humanity's history to dispel the forces of death, wherever they are at work, and to call forth the healing and reconciling forces of life' (in Gutiérrez, 1984: xv).

[112] Ignatius of Loyola believed people who made a fundamental commitment to God would experience consolation or a deep feeling of peace and joy, and a strengthening of trust, faith and hope, if their choices were in accordance with the will of God; they would experience desolation or turmoil if the feelings were not aligned to the will of God.

Such a model can clearly be appropriated for gay people in the church and Nouwen's own absorption of the Latin American approach is similar to that of numerous gay theologians. He notes that the poor and marginalised have become increasingly aware of the forces of death making them strangers in their own land. They are gradually becoming conscious of the ways in which they are bound by hostility, fear, and manipulation, and have slowly come to understand the structures which victimise them. This, Nouwen observes, is a Christ-centred spirituality inductive in character: a spirituality drawn from the concrete daily experiences of Christian communities in Latin America through which a distinct sense of community develops, a gift born out of the common experience of 'the dark night of injustice' (Gutiérrez, 1984: xix).

Similarly, argues McNeill, gay and lesbian Christians are gradually becoming aware of the 'paranoid manipulations', fear and hostility which encircle them. However, he believes they have begun to confront the 'evil structures that victimize them disguised as morality and the will of God' (McNeill, 1996 : 202). In the manner of the poor of Latin America, gays and lesbians have also begun the process of breaking into history with a new positive self-consciousness which has dispelled the shadow of guilt and self-hatred.

Both liberation theologians and gay theologians draw on the experiences of the Hebrews who were exiled to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Fortunato argues that, though different in terms of time and space, the exile of gay Christians is the same as that faced by many other groups who have had to endure banishment for the sake of their faith. He cites the Babylonian exile as 'the most meaningful ancestral journey' gay people can turn to for guidance (Fortunato, 1982: 4). Fortunato also notes that the scriptures written during the exile convey moods similar to those currently experienced by homosexuals in the church. They were marked by denial (Lamentations 5), rage (Ezekiel 18:2, 25) and forlornness (Psalm 137). Initially Israel could not accept the idea that God could allow this to happen.

Fortunato argues that, like the people of Israel, gay people should develop a spiritual awareness that transcends society's limited view of God. Israel 'gained a consciousness that transcended a society that rejected Jews as misfits, a cosmic

wisdom that comprehended the oneness of the universe in which Jews not only "belonged" but were essential instruments of God's plan for salvation' (Fortunato 1982: 43). With a more inclusive view of reality, they were able to embrace the role of God's Suffering Servant and become free enough to give and to love. It was, he suggests, no accident that Jesus and his followers looked to Second Isaiah to understand their vocation: 'Jesus became the Suffering Servant personified. And he is there for gay Christians to claim as an exemplar' (Fortunato, 1982: 43).

Fortunato believes the only healthy way for gay people to deal with their exile is to undertake a process of mourning to let go of their desire to belong to, and be accepted by, all the structures of the world. Recapitulating the ancient spiritual practice of detachment, homosexuals need to go through five stages of mourning: denial, compromise, anger, depression and finally acceptance, a pattern discernible within Nouwen's sexual development. Many people become entrapped, however, by the denial or compromise stage, trying to live out their life as a false self, suppressing or denying their reality as gay people. Or they remain at the stage of anger or depression, becoming bitter or cynical.

McNeill argues that gay people have a 'special need' for a personal spirituality based on their direct experience of God. Closely associated with this is the struggle to achieve the virtue of trust, above all self-trust which is itself a struggle to believe what God is saying directly to homosexuals through their own experiences, a struggle to see themselves as persons with divine dignity and responsibility, to view their gayness as a blessing rather than a curse (McNeill, 1996: 205).

To grasp this, homosexuals have to cultivate their capacity to hear the divine voice in their own experiences. This should be possible given their natural inclination towards spiritual receptivity. McNeill bases his argument on Küng's observation that the essential human psychological foundation and presupposition for faith and a spiritual life is this virtue of trust. Trust is the cornerstone of a psychologically healthy personality. The principal challenge of the spiritual life is to experience the goodness of creation and its essential trustworthiness. Gay people face a 'unique challenge' in their ability to trust creation, says McNeill. As they do not choose their sexual orientation, they see it as a given, a part of created reality. Insofar as they are told to

see themselves as sinful, sick, disordered or evil, they will necessarily experience a deep crisis in their ability to trust the Creator (in Downey, 1993: 505). This may be overstating the case for gay people but McNeill's point is that, if they believe that their sexual orientation is part of the created reality and at the same time that it is an 'orientation to evil,' it is not surprising that they may experience a crisis in their ability to trust creation and God. Their only alternative is to begin the development of a deep spiritual life: 'They must achieve an even deeper trust of self, body, nature, the cosmos and God' (in Downey, 1993: 505).

Nouwen developed his own theological understanding of trust as he began to accept his own homosexuality. This was most evident during his time with the flying trapeze artists who, he said, had given him new insights into the spiritual life: 'Trust is the basis of life. Without trust, no human being can live. Trapeze artists offer a beautiful image of this. Flyers have to trust their catchers. They can do the most spectacular doubles, triples, or quadruples, but what finally makes their performances spectacular are the catchers who are there for them at the right time in the right place' (Nouwen, 1996d: 19). As I have shown, at the time Nouwen was weighing up the psychological possibilities of forming a relationship and leaving L'Arche to explore new avenues. He knew that any radical change would have to involve careful discernment. Making the final decision would be like letting go of the trapeze grip and trusting that God (and, perhaps also, another person) would be there 'to grab him' (Nouwen, *Angels*).

As Stuart and Thatcher have pointed out, there has never been an adequate explanation as to how a religion which stressed belief in a God who created the material world - 'and it was good' - and proclaimed that God became human flesh, should have ended up being so suspicious of the body and so fearful of sexual pleasure. Body theology was inspired and initiated by the feminist movement which reclaimed women's bodies from their objectification by men. Evolving from an understanding of the Incarnation, it used the body as the subject of God's revelation. Unlike dualistic theology which postulates the survival of an immortal soul and the disintegration of a mortal body, an embodied theology relocates salvation in and through the body and is itself a path to holiness. Through this theological approach, our 'alienation from our bodies is healed and we experience the saving grace of God

within them. It is a discovery of ourselves as we are, as bodies ... Becoming bodies, accepting ourselves as embodied, leads to a full appreciation of the sacredness of bodies' (Stuart and Thatcher, 1997: 99).

Body theology, then, is important for an understanding of gay spirituality, as is a theology of relationships. This complex area raises questions about levels of intimacy which, for Nouwen, were never completely resolved. While some gay Christian theologians have argued that committed lesbian and gay relationships are marriages and should be blessed by the church, Stuart says that a great many lesbian and gay people understand their committed sexual relationships, not in terms of marriage or even living together like unmarried heterosexual couples, but in terms of friendship. She sees this as 'a perfect example' of marginal people travelling outside the domain of the dominant discourse, weaving a new tapestry or model with which to understand their lives. In a political, social, cultural and religious context, which devalues friendship, she argues, women and gay men stand out as people who prize friendship highly, not least because people pushed to the edge often accept that friendship is the only means of survival. Friendship for lesbians and gays can emerge as a relationship which, as it develops, can result in 'mutual and equal acceptance, respect and delight' (Stuart, 1995: 48). It is often an embodied relationship with social and political repercussions. Friends offer gay people the physical and emotional support that society expects of families and one must assume, therefore, that they have much to teach a world which has denigrated the value of trusting friendship.

But as Nouwen himself discovered and Stuart testifies, 'yearning to be loved as they are' is often more of an issue for gay men and lesbians than for other people. Mutuality and vulnerability are fundamental to gay relationships. As Stuart notes, friendship tends to involve a merging of selves or souls but many gay men and women do not have a self, soul or heart to merge because they have internalised the homophobia of others and have often been taught to hate themselves. In forming relationships and offering themselves to others, gay people are being asked to give up even that which they do not have: 'Since any sense of self, any sense of being a valid, valuable, loveable person comes about through our relationships with others, and that is the very thing we as lesbian and gay people are asked to sacrifice, the

psychological consequences are enormous. We are taught to be ashamed, to hide our relational character, and this affects our relationships with everyone' (Stuart, 1995: 49-50).

Stuart offers a more appropriate, less dualistic image. Rather than seeing two gay people merging in a relationship, she prefers to think of them in terms of impressing their image on each other so both are changed, made into something new and the impact of the encounter 'shakes the world around them' (Stuart, 1995: 51). In this way, she argues, we are continually being created, renewed and changed by our relationships:

> Our selves are not merged but created in friendships. Because we are shaped by our encounters, our personalities are very different and often of unequal force. Smothering or endeavouring to form another person in our own image is a temptation for some of us, but friendship also involves the negotiation of equality and mutuality in terms of strength of encounter (Stuart, 1995: 51).

The breakdown of Nouwen's relationship with Ball arose partly because of an unequal reciprocity. Nonetheless, through his writings, Nouwen reminds his readers that friends cannot replace God, even when they are divinised to the point of obsession, a feature sometimes of gay infatuation. Friends 'have limitations and weaknesses, like we have. Their love is never faultless, never complete. But in their limitations they can be signposts on our journey toward the unlimited and unconditional love of God' (Nouwen, 1996d: 141). Nouwen believes friendship to be one of the greatest gifts a person can receive, creating a connection beyond common goals, interests or histories: 'It is a bond stronger than sexual union can create, deeper than a shared fate can solidify, and it can be even more intimate than the bonds of marriage ... a unity of souls that gives nobility and sincerity to love' (Nouwen, 1996d: 15). How a celibate priest could know these things is questionable but Sullivan makes a similar observation when he states that friendship is always more accessible than romantic love. For him, friendship 'provided a buffer in the interplay of emotions, a distance that made the risk of intimacy bearable, a space that allowed the other person to remain safely another person' (Sullivan, 1998: 175). While friendship may come more instinctively to some than others, it is not a relationship to which anyone should have a special claim. Gay men have sustained

and nourished it by default, not because they are good at friendship, he argues, but because, 'in the face of a deep and silent isolation, they are human. Insofar as friendship was an incalculable strength of homosexuals during the calamity of AIDS, it merely showed, I think, how great a loss is our culture's general underestimation of this central human virtue' (Sullivan, 1998: 176).

For gay people to reconstruct the *ecclesia spiritualis* and reclaim their place as valued members of the Body of Christ, they need to mould a spirituality from the clays of receptivity, liberation, trust, the body and friendship. Rooted in this spirituality of love and confidence, they will then be able to offer their woundedness to the Christian community as a healing gift. Inspired by their natural openness to the life of the Spirit, empowered by a stronger sense self-esteem and vision of justice, and united by the bonds of friendship and open relationships, they will achieve a spiritual maturation through which to live out their vocation in the Christian community as stated, if not defined, by Nouwen. He must surely have envisaged gay people as the wounded healers both of the church and their own communities, like 'an underground stream nourishing the institution often from the hidden corners of the earth'. [113]

Trinitarian Love

Helminiak's work on the Trinitarian vocation of the gay community is pertinent here. He envisages Christian living within the gay and lesbian community as an earthly parallel to the inner-trinitarian life of God, the perfect community of love. Nouwen himself uses Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity to inspire a meditation on the spiritual movement 'from the house of fear to the house of love' (Nouwen 1996a: 20.). It appears that, while he was severely depressed about his homosexuality, the icon itself gave him spiritual sustenance: 'During a hard period of my life in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible and during which mental and emotional fatigue had made me the easy victim of despair and fear, a long and quiet presence to this icon became the beginning of my healing' (Nouwen, 1996a: 21).

[113] The view of a Catholic priest in the North of England, from a private conversation.

Helminiak explains that, in God, three distinct subjects share one life, one mind, one will and one being so perfectly that they have everything in common except their individual identities. But these identities are determined precisely by their sharing divine life and are constituted by their relations to one another. That granted, he argues, the focus of such a community concerns an inviolable individuality among equals who are dependent on interpersonal relationships but unconstrained by gender specifications. While in society at large, men and women lament the difficulty of maintaining real friendships with one another because erotic interest sometimes intervenes to complicate relationships, there exists within the gay community many female-male relationships free of all genital interest. Such friendships exist not only between homosexual couples but also between couples where one is homosexual and the other heterosexual. Deep male-female friendships do not feature large in such a culture so the existence of precisely such friendships within the gay community - which grants the dignity, individuality and worth of both men and women - represents a new hope for wider society where women can still be treated as second class citizens. This statement of equality holds true across the board, he contends. The stigma attached to homosexuality is so strong it acts as a levelling agent. Compared with one's homosexuality, he says, social status, wealth, education and renown pale in significance. Moreover, because the gay community permits affectionate expression between two people of the same sex, it strikes at the heart of patriarchal culture: 'But the issue here is not the negative gay challenge to a patriarchal system; it is rather the positive gay contribution to the dissolution of sex-role stereotypes' (Helminiak in Thatcher and Stuart, 1996: 320).

At the core of the gay contribution is the insistence that men may love men and women may love women with deeply felt affection. It was precisely this insistence, he points out, that formed the contribution of the gay St Aelred of Rievaulx in *The Mirror of Charity* and *On Spiritual Friendship*. So it is important, Helminiak argues, that it is really a man or really a woman that one is loving. A male member of the gay community, for example, does not necessarily want to relate to an effeminate man on the pretext that the relationship is then somehow heterosexual. Although all members of the gay community have a basic equality, personal identity is not sacrificed. Personal uniqueness is acclaimed and valued through creative, self-expressive individuality. So Helminiak offers a possible contribution of the gay

community towards a richer understanding of the human as male or female. The basis of all human relationships is, then, beyond gender; all are basically equal, but they retain their individuality as unique, gifted beings. Personal relationships are understood as growth-producing.

The trinitarian equality of God parallels the ideal equality among people open to one another in honest, loving relationship. As humans relate with one another in truth and love, sharing more and more in common, they become one. The gay community provides an environment which can foster such a relationship. Women and men relate to one another as friends and equals; differences between the sexes or individuals are not dissolved: 'On the contrary, being gay forces one to find oneself and be oneself ... precisely by means of unifying relationships, unique to the people involved, the gay community fosters and preserves personal individuality' (Helminiak in Thatcher and Stuart, 1996: 324).

In evaluating the vocation of gay Christians, Helminiak suggests that divine life within the Trinity shows a parallel with an ideal of unity fostered within the gay community. The essence of the Christian faith, he argues, is that authentic human growth on earth is ultimately the result of God's own love, the Holy Spirit, poured out among us so, in Christ, human beings become like God; they are divinised. Loving one another as co-equal, co-determined, yet inviolably distinct people beyond gender limitations, humans grow into trinitarian life:

> Precisely because of distinctive aspects of the lesbian and gay community, life on earth for people within that community is a growing participation in God's own life, the completion of Christ's work among us, and the result of the Holy Spirit's mission to us. Thus, the Christian gay community has the possibility and so the vocation of offering our world a model of ideal Christian life in practice (Helminiak in Thatcher and Stuart, 1996: 324).

It is Helminiak's conviction that members of the gay community who 'live deliberately in Christ' must be destined for sharing the inner-trinitarian life to which all are called in Christ. If this is so, then they must surely grow in that life precisely by living their human lives now on earth. Since they are lesbian and gay, they must grow in that life precisely as gay and lesbian. Helminiak argues that, since they are growing in trinitarian life, it is completely appropriate that aspects of their particular

situation be highlighted and held up to the rest of the Christian community as indications of how God's life among humankind may grow. This is especially true when certain values in their life may directly foster that divine life.

But as Helminiak rightly points out, such potential for growth is no exclusive property of the gay community. What is true of the gay community is true of all Christians. All are called to love others, as equals, respectful of individuality, growing in both human and divine life through interrelationship. But, as he sees it, there is nonetheless the possibility of social transformation for the common good emerging in a unique way within the gay community which is what Nouwen may have had in mind when he, too, talked about the 'unique vocation' of gay and lesbian Christians:

> Like everyone else, if they are to love at all, lesbians and gay men must love where they are able, in gay and lesbian relationships. But unlike others, in order to love effectively, lesbians and gay men simply *must* expand their psycho-sexual self-images and develop relationships beyond those conceptualized in current sex-role stereotypes. Otherwise their relationships will be hopelessly superficial and will never survive, for there is virtually no institutional support for those relationships. They have no alternative: lesbian and gay people simply must love deeply and truly' (Helminiak in Thatcher and Stuart, 1996: 325).

Compassion and Community

It seems, then, that Helminiak offers the best and most original model for the outworking of Nouwen's unspecified vision for homosexual Christians in the *ecclesia spiritualis* where, what McNeill terms 'The Gay Virtues', can flower. These qualities of hospitality and compassion are the fruits of gay suffering and must form part of any spirituality for the community. They also happen to be significant themes in Nouwen's writings and, as I have indicated, McNeill acknowledges Nouwen's influence on his own spiritual thinking as a gay theologian. McNeill argues that, in spite of the persecution it has suffered, the gay and lesbian community has always been 'especially blessed' with these virtues which characterised the person of Jesus. But they should be the hallmark of any Christian disciples. The AIDS pandemic brought out these qualities 'in a striking way' (McNeill, 1996: 93). With reference to 1 Peter 4:10 – 'Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards

responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourselves at the service of others' – McNeill states that, in the Christian tradition, such graces are bestowed not only on individuals but to groups, especially to communities which have suffered in kind. While noting that these charisms are not manifested in every gay person – some respond to their exile with acts of self-pity, cynicism and selfishness – McNeill points out that anyone who develops a mature spiritual life will receive their share of these gifts. Gays and lesbians are part of a wider 'community of virtue'; but, because so many of them are closeted in their public life, their gifts can go unnoticed and unsung.

McNeill reminds us of Nouwen when he writes that Christian healers must have wrestled inwardly with temptation, despair and the dark night of the soul, bringing all their anger into full consciousness. They must also have dealt with fear and guilt, especially fear of death and fear of God, lest they collude with the person they are trying to help in evading painful issues which need to be resolved in order for them to achieve spiritual growth and peace. They should be able to articulate the movements of the interior life, he says, and identify their spiritual experiences, so they are no longer victims of the unconscious. They must also be people of compassion, a virtue at the core of their authority. But he stresses that no person can help another on a spiritual level without having the spiritual freedom to enter with his or her whole being into painful situations, even taking the risk of being wounded or destroyed in the process:

> The great fallacy of Christian leadership is to think that you can lead someone out of the spiritual desert of depression, hopelessness, and despair without having been there yourself. We are all called to recognize the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, especially our gay brothers and sisters, in our own hearts and make that recognition the starting point of our service. In other words, we are called to be "wounded healers." One of the great joys of Christian life is the discovery that we can make our wounds available as a resource for the healing of others (McNeill, 1996: 103).

This, of course, is in line with the thinking of Henri Nouwen. McNeill filters the spirituality of Nouwen and applies it to the situation of a homosexual out of which it originally emerged. Nonetheless, McNeill is honest enough to admit that, in his own practice as a psychotherapist, he has at times been unwilling or unable to reach out

and embrace someone in mortal pain and has had to recognise his own limits. Conversely he notes that there have been occasions when he has entered into a pathological form of compassion, based on a masochistic form of symbiosis, a loss of failure to achieve ego identity and ego boundaries, resulting in a sense of fusion with the other: 'Healthy compassion is based on a clear, separate identity of the self and the ability to maintain clear ego boundaries' (McNeill, 1996:105).

For Nouwen, compassion can never be separated from community. It always reveals itself in community, in a new way of being together. It occurs when people let go of their old, anxious ways of thinking and find each other in the mind of Christ: 'It is a great mystery that compassion often becomes real for people not simply because of the deeds of one hospitable individual, but because of an intangible atmosphere resulting from a common life' (Nouwen, 1987: 57). Applied to gay and lesbian Christians, it would seem that such a spirituality is only possible when homosexuals bind together and form community, first among themselves; then among their churches and circles. Nouwen is at pains to emphasise that faith in God's compassionate presence can never be separated from experiencing God's compassionate presence in the community to which people belong: 'Without a sense of being sent by a caring community, a compassionate life cannot last long and quickly degenerates into a life marked by numbness and anger. This is not simply a psychological observation, but a theological truth, because apart from a vital relationship with a caring community a vital relationship with Christ is not possible' (Nouwen, 1987: 61).

If, therefore, gay people do not feel welcomed by their churches, they cannot fulfil this compassionate relationship with the church community. It may be necessary for them to form their own base communities, a movement from displacement to togetherness. Nouwen's spirituality of displacement can be directly applied to the predicament of gay people. As he puts it: 'The desire for community is most often a desire for a sense of unity, a feeling of being accepted, and an experience of at-homeness' (Nouwen, 1987: 62). But he points out that when people form community primarily to heal personal wounds, it cannot become the place where they can realise solidarity with the pains of others. This thinking informs his concept of 'wounded healing.' Rather than seeing themselves as forced to the margins, gay people might

discover that Nouwen's idea of voluntary displacement empowers them to move from being a hidden gay presence, outwardly conforming to society's norms, to becoming a prophetic presence among those with whom they experience a deeper identity. This could be understood as responding to a call. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia* (from *ek,* out, and *kale*, call) suggests that, as a community, Christians are called out of familiar places to unknown territories, out of ordinary and proper places to contexts where people hurt, where gays and lesbians can experience with others a common human brokenness and a common need for healing: 'Voluntary displacement leads us to the existential recognition of our inner brokenness and thus brings us to a deeper solidarity with the brokenness of our fellow human beings. Community, as the place of compassion, therefore always requires displacement (Nouwen, 1987: 64).

Nouwen argues that, through voluntary displacement, community is formed, deepened and strengthened. It is directly linked to a Christian sense of vocation. This call to community is perceived by ceasing to make individual differences a basis for competition and by recognising those differences as potential contributions to a rich life together. Voluntary displacement leads to 'a new togetherness in which we can recognize our sameness in common vulnerability, discover our unique talents as gifts for the upbuilding of the community, and listen to God's call, which continually summons us to a vocation far beyond the aspirations of our career' (Nouwen, 1987:85).

Redemptive Suffering

For Nouwen, the place of suffering is also the place of transformation. The wound is also the gift. The experience of alienation and oppression is also the opportunity for growth and resurrection. The spiritual life is 'a constant choice to let negative experiences - whether they concern despair, doubt, loneliness, anger or sexual confusion - become an opportunity for conversion and renewal' (Nouwen, 1992: BBC). It is about trusting that 'if I embrace in faith my depression, loneliness or struggle, I find, in the middle, light and hope. That is what the Cross is all about. The Cross is a sign of execution, pain and torture but it is also a source of life, hope and joy' (Nouwen, 1992: BBC).

Nouwen's words, then, can encourage homosexuals to trust that their suffering can be ultimately creative and redemptive. But if they already feel ostracised from their local churches and burdened by institutional statements concerning their sexuality, what hope and creativity can there be? Goss argues that any display of compassion has to be matched by a quest for justice. Ecclesial homophobia may lead to the creation of base communities comprised of disenfranchised exiles or oppressed people committed to actively and politically changing oppressive structures. Base communities become nurturing alternative forms of community practice which challenge homophobic power relations in churches and society. He sees them as biblically-centred affinity groups witnessing to God's preferential notion for the oppressed, replicating the *basileia* action of Jesus Christ. A queer Christian base community embodies gay and lesbian experience through a discipleship of equals in facilitating prayer and direct actions which 'transgress the network of homophobic power relations and present a critical alternative' (Goss, 1993: 125).

For Goss love-making and justice-doing are interrelated. Gay and lesbian 'erotic connectedness' starts with self and lover, radiating its embodied love to the oppressed gay and lesbian community and other oppressed peoples. The Christian base community itself becomes a sacrament of liberation when it proclaims the values of God's reign by discourse and practice: 'To liberate churches and society from the grips of homophobia, queer Christians must first liberate themselves. They must experience themselves and their sexuality as graced. Despite the network of homophobic oppression and violence deployed against them, they struggle to understand God's partiality for lesbians and gay men, God's love and compassion for them. Queer Christian base communities form a *basileia* network of new relations and practices' (Goss, 1993: 128).

Such a manifesto is far from the tone and temperament of Henri Nouwen. One could even accuse Nouwen of cowardice by failing to challenge the church's teaching on homosexuality, especially when his own desires and emotions were so conflict with it. Nouwen recognised the pitfalls of being intentionally relevant in a political sense. The spiritual life was so radical in itself that it affected politics and social structures: 'You do not live the spiritual life in order to affect politics, in order to make social

changes. St Benedict changed the whole European culture, not by trying to be a politician but by trying to be faithful to God and his community. A lot of great saints and great spiritual people have had enormous political effect but not because they were after the effect themselves' (Nouwen, 1992: BBC).

There is perhaps both wisdom and caution in the words. He would have been hesitant about endorsing Goss's political vision for gay base communities and have felt more comfortable with Goss's work on healing and reconciliation. For Goss follows Nouwen in declaring that, as queer Christians become aware of their own internalised homophobia, they acknowledge their own woundedness, oppression and sinfulness, and their need for healing. Some gay people, it must be stated, have damaged their own bodies with drug and alcohol abuse, abusive relationships and narcissistic behaviour. Queer Christians do justice by healing and changing themselves. They transform exile into grace. As they become aware of how they contribute to social oppression of other groups, queer Christians can understand that homophobic people are not only oppressors but also children of God. Oppressors are caught in homophobic social processors; they also need healing and liberation (Goss, 1992: 134).

As wounded healers, gay Christians manifest special graces enabling them to fulfil their vocations to love and reconcile In so doing to usher in the *basilea* of truth and justice, calling others to conversion. But it would be wrong to suggest that gay people and their relationships are a special case, pleading for positive discrimination over and above heterosexual relationships. However, as Cotter has pointed out, particular historical circumstances do place some people in a context of oppression and struggle which results in experiences through which they have 'something special' to say to the next generation if not their own. In time, he suggests, the majority may come to understand that the experience of the pioneering minority has something of truth for them too. Sexuality has been 'our neglected outcast' and redemption can come only by welcoming that outcast home. The path to homosexual holiness is not easy. The disturbing love of God can be painful, for it 'heals us with scalpel and laser, but it does not remove from us our particular identity and sexuality.

Rather does it challenge us to become whole and holy through acknowledging whatever is true, and living that truth in love'.[114]

McNeill thinks the main reason why the gay and lesbian community has emerged at this point in history is because it has a special role to play in reconciling divisions in society. Theology, he suggests, must be constructed from the centre of human life, manifesting itself in a history of human emancipation and growth in freedom. The true disciple of Jesus, says McNeill, will be committed to removing the causes of human suffering through a ministry of healing:

> We are called to recognize the sufferings of our times in our own hearts, especially that of our lesbian sisters and gay brothers, and to make that recognition the starting point of our service. This service will not be authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the sufferings it seeks to heal. Our healing ministry demands a deep understanding of the ways we can wrestle with God, and how we can courageously overcome our fears in order to make ourselves available as wounded healers (McNeill, 1996: 88).

McNeill, again, captures the Nouwenesque spirit, although he is much bolder and more prophetic on this issue. Invigorated by the spirituality of Nouwen, McNeill can best point us towards what Nouwen might have meant when he talked of gay people having a unique vocation the Christian community, what we might understand as the reconstruction of the *ecclesia spiritualis* by gay people who have been humiliated and hurt by Vatican documents condemning their 'disordered' lifestyles. McNeill thinks gay and lesbian people should become a therapeutic community, healing the wounds that other people, including the church, have inflicted on them: 'If we can heal the wounds of self-hatred and self-rejection, then we can let go of the neurotic anger we feel towards those we see as having inflicted the wounds' (McNeill, 1996: 184).

As Nouwen himself might have said, community is the place where gay people lay themselves open to genuine conversion (McNeill,1996: 188). This is not an alternative church but a battleground of the movement from captivity to renewal, from conformity to transformation (or, as Nouwen would certainly have put it, a

[114] Jim Cotter, *Homosexual and Holy*, The Way, July 1988, vol.28, no. 3, p. 242.

movement from hostility to hospitality). A Christian community will always have to struggle with conflict, pain and anguish as it battles with false values but at the same time it can be a place of love and joy, somewhere to grow in truth and holiness.[115] 'It is the place where the healing of our own lives as lesbian and gay Christians becomes the foundation for the healing of our gay brothers and sisters, as well as of the community at large' (McNeill, 1996: 188). This will involve the provision of all the needs of lesbians and gays that the churches, because of their homophobia, have failed to meet. McNeill argues that the gay and lesbian spiritual community needs to provide the human and spiritual setting where the 'coming out' process can be accomplished. He believes that the gay Christian community should recognise, ordain and mission gays and lesbians to a specific ministry within their own community. This missioning, he envisages, would take the form of a new understanding of confirmation as it applies to the gay community. 'Gay people have a special need for a pentecostal outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that, our wounds having been healed, we can go forth with courage and maturity to serve God by serving each other' (McNeill, 1996: 199). The gay community can also offer the rest of humanity the development of a relational ethics, a new understanding of sexual relations based on an interpersonal ethics of love rooted in the equality of partners. Since gay couples have been obliged to form such an ethic, there is a 'providential aspect to the emergence of a Christian gay community at this point in history' (McNeill, 1996: 201).

In language reminiscent of Nouwen, McNeill argues that deep in the psyche of gay men and lesbian women is the war between night and day, light and darkness, between the voice that would like to plunge the spirit into self-rejection and the voice of love striving to bring peace, love and joy. Drawing on Nouwen's book, *Life of the Beloved*, McNeill says that belovedness applies in a 'special way' to gays and lesbians. 'As Nouwen points out, the greatest trap in our life, especially, I would add,

[115] Sister Eva Heymann believes the experience of working closely with people living with HIV and AIDS in London has taught her 'so much about what love is really about.' She recalls: 'I remember a father who walked through the wards of a hospital to get to the little room where his daughter was dying. He would pass the men who were in bed with their male partners sitting at the side and say "I have never seen so much love." He was a man who felt very uncomfortable about the gay community but, for him, seeing love in action meant also something about who Christ was' (Eva Heymann, 2000).

in our life as gay persons, is not the trap of success, popularity, power, or pleasure. Rather, that trap is self-rejection, the belief that in our very essence we are unlovable and unloved' (McNeill, 1995: 148). In realising the *ecclesia spiritualis*, gay men and lesbians prove this cannot be the case.

8

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the spirituality of Henri J. M. Nouwen cannot be fully understood in isolation from the emotional vicissitudes of his own life. Indeed, the study of a particular set of spiritual writings can never be separated from what is known – or can be known - about the life of their author. The connection is indissoluble, too valuable to be overlooked.

In the introduction, I explained that the thesis would be an investigation, a piece of spiritual detective work into the hidden life of 'a saint with wounds'.[116] In this respect, the research has been both a spiritual and journalistic exercise. While this methodology has largely reflected my own interests and life experience, I nonetheless believe it has been an appropriate way to study Nouwen. While the Church and the Media are sometimes perceived to be arch enemies (mutually suspicious), their offspring, spirituality and journalism, are more like siblings (mutually seeking).[117] A comparison may be made here between monasticism and journalism. The monk is called to perceive 'what eye has not seen, nor ear heard' (Steindhl-Rast, 1995: 28). The journalist is trained to see what other people do not, to make connections, to hear what is not being said. My study of Nouwen, journalist of a spiritual, owes as much to my journalistic training as it does to my spiritual formation. It therefore seems appropriate that I should have filtered his life and work through these different lenses.

The approach has been biographical in the spirit of Richard Holmes for whom biography became 'a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone's path through the past, a following of footsteps. You would never quite catch them; no, you would never quite catch them. But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeting figure in such a way as to bring it alive in the

[116] A description of Nouwen by Professor Louis Dupré.

[117] See my article, The Monk and the Journalist, A Spirituality of Listening and Seeing, in Spirituality Vol.5, November-December 1999 No. 27, pp 371-376.

present' (Holmes, 1986: 27). For Holmes, the essential process of biography has two main elements or 'closely entwined strands'. The first is the gathering of the factual materials; the second is the creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship between the biographer and his subject, an ongoing dialogue between the two as they move over the same historical ground and trail of events: 'There is between them a ceaseless discussion, a reviewing and questioning of motives and actions and consequences, a steady if subliminal exchange of attitudes, judgements and conclusions' (Holmes, 1986: 66).

My relationship with Nouwen has not been so different from Nouwen's association with Merton: 'I met him only once ...Yet thereafter, his person and work had such an impact on me, that his sudden death stirred me as if it were the death of one of my closest friends. It therefore seems natural for me to write for others about the man who has inspired me most in recent years' (Nouwen, 1991b: 3). The recollection of my one encounter with Nouwen (an interview) and the content of our subsequent correspondence had to merge with my earlier impressions of him through the pages of his books and the varying perspectives of him by his friends. As Holmes notes, hero-worship can develop into a love affair as one more or less consciously identifies with the subject: 'If you are not in love with them you will not follow them – not very far, anyway. But the true biographic process begins precisely at the moment, at the places, where this naïve form of love and identification breaks down. The moment of personal disillusion is the moment of impersonal, objective re-creation' (Holmes, 1986: 67).

This was certainly true as I absorbed the unflattering stories about Nouwen and then stood back more objectively to reflect on what I had heard. Yet, from the outset, I sensed that his sometimes unpredictable and manipulative behaviour had been a dramatic expression of a hidden suffering. It was essential to dig, to detect, as Holmes puts it, 'a more complicated and subtle pattern'. Through its uncovering of personal suffering, biography can find creative force and human nobility (Homes, 1996: 130). Because Nouwen had never written an autobiography and there were no detailed accounts of his life, I found myself working with a *tabula rasa*, without any powerfully received images of Nouwen's character or inner identity, except through his own pen.

Those who write about Nouwen seem to warn others against delving too deeply, as though researchers should not ask too many questions. Durback, quoting Nouwen, says he is 'aware of the author's sober warning: "The mystery of one man is too immense and too profound to be explained by another person." Biographers beware' (Durback, 1998: 21). Beumer is also cautious: 'The biographer has an eager desire to know more and more, as gradually he does. He is like a voyeur who silently stalks the person and his environment, seeking more data and facts ...Nevertheless, at a certain moment he must stop, because he may not violate the secret of the person he is writing about' (Beumer, 1997: 7). While I would agree that a sensitive approach to another's life is a pre-requisite, this should not prevent a researcher from asking questions or following leads especially where, in Nouwen's case, his own ambiguous writing impels a student to find out more.

The discovery of Nouwen's secret struggle with homosexuality at the commencement of the research has not so much coloured the project as driven it. It shaped my subsequent questions with interviewees, caused a certain degree of friction between some of Nouwen's associates and seemed to separate friends into two camps: those who believed the truth of his life should be revealed and those who did not. But as Callahan reflected: 'There are those of us who, for whatever reason, may want to protect Nouwen after his death. I do not think he would have cared that much' (Callahan, 1997). However, in his final journal, Nouwen appears to be show greater concern: 'The idea of people posthumously exploring the details of my personal life frightens me, but I am reassured by the knowledge of having friends who know me intimately and will guard me not only in life but also in memory' (Nouwen, 1998: 17). Nouwen, it must be assumed, was clearly troubled by the thought that, even after his death, his homosexuality might be exposed. But the journal, edited after he had died, was found to contain numerous references to gay people and gay affection, so perhaps Nouwen was more confused than frightened. In the early weeks of research, one gay friend, in particular, revealed, in an unsolicited fashion, the fact that Nouwen had been homosexual. This secret was unveiled to me in the form of a question: 'Did Henri ever tell you that he was a gay man?' Other friends, when prompted, confirmed the fact.

While it was always apparent to me that Nouwen's private life should not dissected, the impact of his homosexuality on his emotional life seemed crucial to the investigation. It accounted for the evasive tone of his texts when talking about intimacy, his declared love for Nathan Ball and the increasing number of references to gay friends and homosexual issues in his later books. Some friends might want to play down the significance. As Peter Naus puts it: 'I have always believed that his reasons for being gay and the underlying dynamics were extremely complicated and far from transparent. As I see it, the primary issue in Henri's case was not his sexual orientation but a deep-seated insecurity, a sense that he was not securely connected to the people around him, including the significant others in his life' (Naus in Porter 2001: 85). As a psychologist, Naus makes a valid observation. But, as a heterosexual, it is unlikely that he would have understood Nouwen as a gay man would have understood him. Glaser, a gay friend with whom Nouwen discussed his sexuality, comments that Nouwen had once told him that, when he died, he would like to have someone at his grave whose life would be radically altered by his passing: 'In other words, Henri missed having an intimate relationship, a partner in life who would deeply grieve his loss' (Glaser in Porter 2001: 131). Glaser says Nouwen claimed more of his own gay identity as the years went by. The man who had written *The Self-Availability of the Homosexual* 25 years before was 'taking his own advice and choosing friends with whom he did not have to hide his hunger and his hope' (Glaser in Porter 2001: 132) Glaser believes that when Nouwen, in his last book, writes descriptively of various men he encounters, the attraction is both spiritual and erotic at the same time (Glaser, 2001).

McNeill, however, cautions against any over-analysis of Nouwen and it is important to acknowledge his concerns. He believes no person has the right to ask whether Nouwen should have 'come out' or to suggest he would have been happier had he had a permanent gay relationship. Although McNeill had no personal knowledge of Nouwen's life, he argues that Nouwen's special relationship with God was on a par with that of St John of the Cross in terms of intensity. God asked special sacrifices of Nouwen, he senses; one of them might have been to forgo a human intimate relationship and cultivate that intense personal relationship with God: 'I accept with St Augustine the belief "God made us for God's self and out hearts will not rest until they rest in God." Nouwen went directly for the brass ring – whereas most of us

make our way to God's through our share of human love. We who are gay need to have a direct and personal experience of God's love, an experience that frees us from all external voices. I know in my own case Nouwen's writings showed me the way to that personal experience' (McNeill, 2001).

Any honest study of Nouwen must take seriously the impact of his homosexuality on his own emotional life and how, as a writer of personal experience, he drew on that affectivity in crafting a spirituality chiefly for a heterosexual audience. Perhaps that is what he meant when he stated that gay people had a mission to straight people. LaNoue's painstaking work, published since details of Nouwen's homosexuality became common knowledge, fails to accept the significance. While declaring that Nouwen's spirituality is above all relational, she makes only passing reference to his sexuality. In the midst of 'this tortuous struggle', she argues, Nouwen 'longed for healing and release from desires for relationships that he knew could never fill his innermost need for the intimacy of God' (LaNoue, 2001: 84). This seems to contradict the personal knowledge of Glaser and the many others who knew him at a deeper level. It also indicates that any assessment of Nouwen's spiritual significance has to be matched by a more profound exploration of his life. LaNoue seems embarrassed by the issue, pointing to the fact that Nouwen accepted those who lived a homosexual lifestyle 'as people still loved by God' and neither condemned nor condoned their lifestyle in his writing: 'Nouwen was an open book in many ways, but on this particular subject, he sought to be wise in what he revealed and what he kept private' (LaNoue, 2001: 85). By contrast, Beumer takes Nouwen to task for his avoidance of various subjects: 'Is silence about certain situations and abuses in the church not highly unspiritual? That women have been made second-class members, that homosexuals are still regarded with disgust, were these situations outside his purview? ... Doesn't the theology of homosexuality deserve a spiritual Christian interpretation?' (Beumer, 1997: 168-169).

Both Beumer and LaNoue, writing from a Protestant perspective, offer many clear and useful insights into the spirituality of Nouwen but their respective presentations of Nouwen's *persona* are not enhanced by any serious, personal interviews. Their approach, while thorough at one level, lacks first-hand information about the *person* behind the writings and therefore does not shed much new light on a semi-

confessional spiritual writer. Indeed, the English word person, from the Latin *personare*, as Nouwen reminded his readers, means 'sounding through'. The writings of a famous spiritual guide can be illuminated only when authors are prepared to 'sound through' a 'truth, a beauty, and a love which is greater, fuller, and richer than we ourselves can grasp' (Nouwen, 1982b: 87).

The truth, beauty and love of Henri Nouwen shaped his homosexuality. But his own deep fear of it brought emotional instability to his inner life and a degree of dishonesty to his writings. The struggles provided the momentum for his writing at a time when many North Americans were hungry for a mystical spirituality rooted in the psychological joys and pains of everyday living. Recognising this sense of disconnectedness, heightened by the alienation he himself felt as a homosexual, he discerned the hunger as 'the first sign of God's presence' (Nouwen, 1982b: 95). The desire for the spiritual life was the start of the movement 'from fragmentation to unity, from many things to the one necessary thing, from our divided lives to undivided lives in the Spirit' (Nouwen, 1982b: 94). In some ways, this thinking reflected his own personal struggles as a gay man who yearned to move from his own inner sense of fragmentation to a place of unity. Now that Nouwen's struggles as a homosexual priest have been acknowledged, it is not possible to read his texts as though that knowledge did not exist. The disclosure of sexual identity is fundamental to understanding his spirituality.

Harank argues that writing is usually one of the ways people can be truthful about themselves, an exercise in creating meaning out the chaos and confusion of their lives. But for Nouwen the articulation of his emotional struggles in print had the effect of connecting his readers with his general sense of anguish but divorcing him from the truth of his sexuality:

> Somehow his books were able to touch that place of making people realise they were not alone in their confusion, anxiety or spiritual journey whether married, single or disabled. He was able through those words to touch the lives of many people. On the other hand, however, the words became a disguise, a way of distancing, of not really dealing with what was going on in parts of his life (Harank, 2000).

McNeill points up the paradox of Nouwen's life and spirituality. Nouwen, he argues, had an 'extraordinary share' in the suffering of loneliness and depression, a crucifixion, his own dark night of the soul: 'This had something to do with his gayness. Our greatest wound is always interiorised self-rejection and fear that we are not loved by God. Nouwen's spirituality spoke in a special way to our gay experience and yet, at the same time, it has a universal resonance for all who search for an intimate relationship of love with God' (McNeill, 2001). McNeill claims gay spirituality is unique because gay men are 'very deeply in touch with the feminine – and the feminine is, of its essence, a yearning for intimacy with another.' When a gay person, such as Nouwen, writes about the spiritual life, he argues, he is writing out of the perspective of a person hungry and thirsty for complete intimacy, ultimately expressed as 'intimacy into God'. McNeill believes Nouwen had a particular understanding of God's love with resonates with the experience of gay people because it was experienced in a feminine way.

While Nouwen's spirituality (the spirituality of a gay man) has been hugely influential in the heterosexual world, it provides, then, a particular model for homosexuals in the church, a community in which, Nouwen believed, gay people had a 'unique vocation'. This vocation is partly a mission to straight people, as Nouwen himself suggested, especially in the realm of a deeper understanding of friendship, fidelity and the pain and joy of human love. But Nouwen's writings also provide a particular model of spirituality for gay people themselves. As one theologian has argued, in any assessment of Nouwen, it is important to remember that the pre-Vatican II model of a priest was very much that of a psychologically well-defended person. Spirituality was a training in warfare against temptation, a daily mortification to strengthen the will and diminish the claims of the emotions. Vocation meant set-apart-ness, a trained detachment, an invulnerability to disturbing passions: 'Henri Nouwen, while rooted in this tradition, transposed the celibate vocation to a different key. The theme was to be, not sacrificial detachment, but vulnerability'.[118]

Vulnerability is a significant theme in any spirituality for gay people. It is both the state and the emotion which lie behind Nouwen's understanding of 'the wounded

[118] Angela Tilby, *The Wounded Healer*, Church Times, 19 September 1997.

healer.' It is the place from where homosexuals can themselves show the church what it means to love and, in the light of their alienation from the institution, what it means also to forgive – to give for love. It is the springboard for a ministry of compassion, social justice and spiritual direction. It is the route to a vulnerable God and the mystery of unconditional love. While Nouwen's work will continue to have universal appeal, it must also be reclaimed for the gay Christian community. His writings constitute a model for gay people in the church but his troubled emotional life does not. As one commentator states, the church's teachings on homosexuality 'added considerable weight to the burden Nouwen carried ... can the church continue to collude with allowing God's children to suffer unnecessarily just because they are gay? An affirming church might have offered him the love he desperately sought, the welcome he found so elusive, the embrace which signified everything he wanted'.[119] Nouwen's response would have been to forgive the body which had taught him the meaning of forgiveness:

> When we have been wounded by the Church, our temptation is to reject it. But when we reject the Church, it becomes very hard for us to keep in touch with the living Christ ... The challenge if to forgive the church' (Nouwen, 1996d: 333).

Nouwen's point is borne out by the experience of 'David Matthew' who left a British seminary in 2000, shortly before his ordination. In the concluding months of his priestly formation, he discovered 'a well of shame within'. In coming to terms with his gay orientation, which involved 'revealing to myself an unwanted sexuality and finding the straight identity I had desired absent', Matthew says he received support, not rejection, from his clerical superiors in the seminary:

> An important part of me was unknown. I had been preparing for priesthood as somebody I was no longer. The old self had evaporated. Within days of acknowledging the new identity to myself and to a tutor, I began to receive support from the seminary. I was even told by my bishop that what was happening to me was wonderful. The sensitivity, even delight, in the living attitude towards me by senior clerics jarred with the official teaching which disseminates suspicion, disgust, guilt, fear and anger.

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[119] Ivan Mann, review of *Wounded Prophet: a portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* by Michael Ford, Modern Believing, October 1999, p. 101

> It was through the Church that I had learned about forgiveness, generosity, patience and kindness and it is precisely by trying to live out these qualities that I am able to stay alongside a community which can both tenderly authenticate a new identity and yet teach dryly that I am in some way flawed. Any shortcomings I encounter are made up for by these qualities. Any kindness I find teaches me further the depth of authentic charity (Matthew, 2001).[120]

The spirituality, then, of Nouwen is already being appropriated through the lived experience of gay people who want to stay close to the church which has formed them. But they are unlikely to be inspired by the vagaries of Nouwen's own emotional life. As I have shown, while he supported homosexuals in their relationships and spoke to their causes, it was only late in his life that he started to savour the inner freedom to claim his own homosexuality as a route to love. Permanent intimacy eluded him as he sought to remain faithful to the vows of his priesthood. It is questionable whether, in the light of this inner conflict, such loyalty is psychologically healthy or spiritually honest. What is certain is that the creative tensions at the heart of Henri Nouwen became the vehicle through which other people were brought to God. More specifically, they formed the gospel of a unique wounded healer whose writings and ministry will become iconic for gay and lesbian Christians. But the way circumstances forced Nouwen to deal with his personal wound of love surely cannot serve as a healthy model for the Church's homosexual members, especially those who comprise its clergy. The tortured brilliance of Henri J. M. Nouwen leaves a legacy of profound spiritual writings for all people, especially gay wounded lovers of the 21st century. But, in many ways, the emotional life itself was tragic and sounds a warning to the priesthood of the third millennium.

[120] David Matthew is the pseudonym of a 33-year-old gay man in London who accepted his homosexuality during his seminary training but decided to leave shortly before his ordination.

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Bart and Patricia Gavigan, Surrey (January 1998).

Father Tom Giblin, Dublin (October 2001).

Chris Glaser, Ghost Ranch, New Mexico (October 1997); Atlanta (February 2001).

Jay and Wendy Greer, New York (October 1997).

Gustavo Gutierrez, Peru (March 1998).

Professor Frans Haarsma, Nijmegen (September 1997).

Dean Hammer, Middletown, Connecticut (March 1998).

Michael Harank, Oakland, California (November 1997); Belfast (August 2000).

Robert Heller, New York (October 1997).

Sister Eva Heymann, London (November 2000).

Professor Michael Higgins, Waterloo, Ontario (November 1997).

Bishop Henry Hill, Willowdale, Ontario (November 1997).

Jeff Jackson, San Francisco (November 1997).

Robert Jonas, Watertown, Massachusetts (October 1997).

Father Bill Kirkpatrick, London (December 1997).

Joan Kroc, from her private plane flying across the US (November 1997).

Jan ter Laak, Amsterdam (May 1998).

Simone Landrien, Trosly (September 1997).

Meg Lavin, Toronto (November 1997).

Robert Lentz, New Mexico (January 1998).

Rose Lucey, San Francisco (November 1997).

Don MacClannen, Washington DC (February 1998).

Carl MacMillan, Richmond Hill, Ontario (November 1997).

David Martin, Toronto (March 1998).

Father Rodney de Martini, California (May 1998).

Bob Massie, Somerville, Massachusetts (May 1998).

'David Matthew', London (August 2001).

Gerard T. McCrane, Cochabamba, Bolivia (March 1998).

Peggy McDonnell, New Jersey (March 1998).

Father Don McNeill, CSC, Notre Dame, Indiana (November 1997).

Father John McNeill, New Jersey (May 2001).

Dr John Mogabgab, Nashville (October 1997).

Maurice Monette, San Francisco (November 1997).

Sister Sue Mosteller, C. S. J. Richmond Hill, Ontario (November 1997).

Dr Peter Naus, Kitchener, Ontario (November 1997)

Yushi Nomura, Tokyo (January 1998).

Heiltjen Nouwen, Rotterdam (September 1997).

Laurent Nouwen, Rotterdam (September 1997).

Paul Nouwen, Rotterdam (September 1997).

Laurent Jean Marie Nouwen, Geysetern (September 1997).

Dr Michael O'Laughlin, Harvard (October 1997).

Parker Palmer, Madison, Wisconsin (January 1998).

Ernest Petersen, New Mexico (October 1997).

Beth Porter, Richmond Hill, Ontario (November 1997 and June 1998).

The Revd Donald Reeves, London (September 1997).

Larry Rich, Maryknoll, New York (October 1998).

Richard Rohr, New Mexico (October 1998).

Brother Ross, Rochester NY (October 1997).

John and Mary Santos, Florida (January 1998).

The Revd Dr Robert Schuller, Annaheim, California (February 1998).

Lieven Secru, Brussels (September 1997).

The Revd Paul Shackerley, Essex (February 1998).

Lorenzo Sforza-Cesarini, Richmond Hill, Ontario (June 1998).

Cardinal Adrianus Simonis, Utrecht (September 1997).

'Father Ian Soames', Devon (October 2000).

Louis ter Steeg, Utrecht (September 1998).

Joseph Stellpflug, Toronto (March 1998).

Rodleigh Stevens and The Flying Rodleighs, Frankfurt (December 1997).

Marjorie Thompson. Nashville (October 1997).

Paul Tuck, Richmond Hill, Ontario (November 1997).

Bill van Buren, Richmond Hill, Ontario (November 1997).

Dr Jean Vanier, Trosly (September 1997).

Paul Voestermans, Nijmegen (September 1997).

Joe Vorstermans, Richmond Hill, Ontario (November 1997 and June 1998).

Jim Wallis, Washington DC (February 1997).

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APPENDICES

These are transcripts of two contrasting interviews which informed the thesis. They are taken from different 'eras' of the research period. The first, conducted in the early stages when I was undertaking preliminary study into Nouwen's life and spirituality, influenced the early chapters. The second, carried out towards the end of my research, relates to my considerations on homosexuality and the priesthood. The questions and answers are reproduced in the order they were asked and answered. They have been edited only in order to protect confidential information or to eliminate anecdotal recollection considered irrelevant to the purposes academic research. The interviewees were told that their use of 'Henri' would be changed to 'Nouwen' in the thesis.

APPENDIX ONE

Interview with Dr Peter Naus

Peter Naus is a Dutch-born social psychologist who met Nouwen while they were students at the University of Nijmegen. They first became friends while Nouwen was instructing his fiancé in the Roman Catholic faith. Colleagues informed me that Nouwen respected Naus throughout his life. I therefore considered him an important interviewee who might be able to throw light on Nouwen's own psychological development. The interview was taped at Peter Naus's home in Kitchener, Ontario, in November 1997. He approved the quotations.

Michael Ford: When did Henri first come into your life as you recall?

Peter Naus: It must have been in September 1957. I was the facilitator of a discussion group for first-year psychology students. I was a second-year psychology student at the University of Nijmegen and I have never forgotten that. I have never forgotten that because I was clearly somewhat apprehensive about this new responsibility that I had. The bell rings and I open the door from upstairs – my room was on the second floor – and I look down and I see what looked to me like a much older man coming up the stairs. He wasn't that much older but he was older than me and other students. That was

Henri who by that time already was a priest so he had finished seminary studies so he was indeed several years older than we were.

MF: What was he studying?

PN: He was going to study psychology. He was a first-year psychology student and thus he had to be a member of the discussion group of first-year psychology students and I happened to be his group facilitator.

MF: Can you remember what you were discussing?

PN: I don't remember. I am sure he took part but I don't remember that. I only remember him coming up the stairs and me being somewhat taken aback by the fact he was a bit older.

MF: But you became friends through your time at Nijmegen?

PN: Yes.

MF: So you were both training to be psychologists?

PN: Right.

MF: He happened to be a priest and you didn't?

PN: Yes.

MF: You were both Catholics and so you had some common ground there?

PN: Right. He specialised in clinical psychology, though, and I did social psychology.

MF: Was it unusual to find a priest reading psychology?

PN: No, I don't remember ever thinking that it was unusual for him to be interested in psychology. I don't think he was the only one. There were several priests who were studying psychology at the same time.

MF: As you got to know him over the five years, do you recall anything about those days at Nijmegen?

PN: He was a very serious student. He was very active. He was also a member of a social group of students which indicated that he was a fairly active member in the social life of students. I didn't have a lot of contact with him until I met my wife and it became clear that there was a good possibility that we would get married. At that time it was seen as not strictly necessary but recommended that the non-Catholic partner become a Roman Catholic. Henri introduced my wife, Anke, to Roman Catholicism and then we had regular contact at that time.

MF: What do you recall of him as a psychology student? What were his main interests in the clinical world then?

PN: I don't know about his earlier years but I know that, near the end of his studies, he participated in a social isolation experiment where a group of students volunteered to be in isolation for a certain period of time. I don't remember they ever went underground in a coalmine or another isolation setting, but Henri volunteered for that and I have never forgotten that.

I don't think he and I talked that much about psychology at the time. We circulated in different groups. My contact with him was mainly established when he became the instructor for Anke.

MF: But he wasn't one for trying to convert people to Roman Catholicism?

PN: No. I remember our conversations as being at least as important for me as they were for Anke because Henri opened totally new perspectives for me on church teaching and on the Bible.

MF: In what ways?

PN: He was much more open than I had been used to, even though I was a member of a certain discussion group which dealt with the connection between religion and psychology. We challenged some church teachings within that context. I still found Henri's perspective to be very refreshing.

MF: Why do you think that was, though?

PN: I think that I came from a very traditional background. Even though I was getting used to asking important intellectual questions, I think I was still afraid to do that with my own religion and Henri made that a lot easier. There was an openness about his approach that I wasn't used to.

MF: Did it seem strange to hear of such approach in pre-Vatican II days?

PN: Yes, absolutely. He wasn't worried about little details either. I'm sure in some ways, certainly for that time, it was a very unusual instruction. I think that he tried to establish as best as he could whether certain fundamental beliefs were important to Anke. A lot of the details around what it means to be a Roman Catholic he didn't give any attention to. In short, I think he was very well able to distinguish between what was really important about becoming a Roman Catholic and what was on the periphery of that.

MF: What *was* important as far as he saw it?

PN: Belief in God. Belief in Christ. And I think the importance of loving one's neighbour and seeing that as an expression of the love for God and being loved by God. I think those were the core things at the time.

MF: Those are very Christian fundamentals, not explicitly Roman Catholic?

PN: Absolutely.

MF: How did your friendship develop?

PN: I am not so sure that we were friends in the real sense of the word when we were in Nijmegen. I think that the friendship really came later.

MF: He went on to the Menninger Foundation. Did you see this sense of religion and psychiatry coming together within him?

PN: Clearly he was looking for something that would combine his interests in psychology and still probably theology at that time, but probably ministry. That's what he found in pastoral psychology and he had figured out that the Menninger Foundation would be a very good place to study that.

MF: Did you next link up at Notre Dame University in Indiana?

PN: While he was visiting professor in pastoral psychology there, he wrote to me and asked if I was interested in coming to the US for a year to teach there. When I went there, we had almost daily contact between August 1966 and September 1967. I think he taught more traditional areas in psychology as well such as clinical psychology.

MF: Are you aware of any of his psychological interests at that time?

PN: No.

MF: What do you remember of him as a professor?

PN: He was a very enthusiastic teacher. By all accounts, he was very much respected by his students. He very carefully prepared. He took his teaching job very seriously.

MF: Was he talked about by other people? Was he making an impact then?

PN: He was establishing himself. He was known on campus and by the president of the university.

MF: Why was he 'known'?

PN: Henri got to know people. And he also got to know the people in power rather quickly. Even back at Nijmegen he got very involved in contact between Roman Catholics and Jews. He made all the right contacts. He met the Ambassador of Israel to Holland. He organised all kinds of meetings so people could gain a better understanding of the State of Israel.

MF: Was he marking his mark in ways that were different from other professors?

PN: Undoubtedly. His approach to psychology was different. At Notre Dame there were several people who were trained in classical behaviourism which is a particular school in psychology. It is an approach to psychology which, as the name indicates, puts a heavy emphasis on behaviour, on measuring behaviour which tends to be distrustful of anything that goes on inside the person or distrustful of what is said about that which goes on inside the person. It tends to understand psychology as a science and tries to defend that the scientific method should be used for psychology. Henri put a lot of emphasis of people's experience rather than on people's behaviour. It was the inner life that you had to get to know rather than focus on outside behaviour.

MF: Was his spirituality at that stage influencing his psychological approach?

PN: No. His psychology was very much influenced by some of his professors who were phenomenologists – these are people who focus on a person's experience and try to describe that experience in as much detail as possible. Connected with it is much attention for the inner life. In many ways I think Henri's spirituality came out of the kind of psychology he had been exposed to, more than the other way round.

MF: Could you describe the concepts?

PN: If you read his books, they almost all start with a description of actual experiences of people: what people feel, what certain occurrences are like for them. Then he gives that a spiritual meaning but he starts out with the human experience, maybe not always but quite often. It seems to be especially the books on ministry do

that. If you think of his core concept the wounded healer, that is a very profound spiritual concept. But it is also a very profound psychological concept.

MF: Could you explain that for me?

PN: If you try to understand what the nature of caring is. Caring is another one of these concepts that you can look at in a spiritual sense but you can also look at it, as I looked at it, in a psychological sense and in a very practical one. What does it mean to care for a person who is in need? What characteristics are required to be a good care-giver? The most fundamental characteristic is to be wounded healer: that is to acknowledge that there is a fundamental similarity between me who is care-giving and you who is care-receiving. The commonality is in the fact that we both are fundamentally vulnerable and we are both fundamentally broken. At this particular moment, your brokenness may be about something other than my brokenness. But we share this common fate of brokenness and if I as a care-giver can understand, that is what it means to understand my woundedness. To me it's a psychological concept, not within a behaviouristic tradition, but within a phenomenological tradition.

MF: Was America ready for that approach as psychology and spirituality were burgeoning? People were asking about meaning …

PN: I think the power of Henri's writing was that people recognised their own experiences in what he wrote about. Henri would say if people cannot connect their own experiencing to what you are talking about you might as well forget it. They will not remember it. It will not make any difference to them. They have to be able to connect it. In order to make that connection, you have to be able to describe that experience in a way that is recognisable, in a way where you can say 'Yes, I know that.' That is a phenomenological approach that was not very common to the American tradition. I am not so sure that it was because there was interest in psychology that Henri became popular. I think he became popular because people recognised themselves in the experiences he talked about.

MF: So was he one of the first spiritual writers to have the courage to write about experience and his own experience? This must have set him apart. Somehow he was

able to articulate the human condition in a way that other spiritual writers hadn't managed?

PN: That's right. Yes. You can do spiritual writing which is more or less psychological. You can do spiritual writing that is almost transcendental. It refers to a human experience but it never really describes human experiences. It talks about prayer and relationship with God – all of these terms. It was at another level. To me what Henri did in his writing he always found a way of connecting the two so he would say to pastoral people 'Do not become psychologists. Do not stay at this level. Let psychologists do that. You have to bring something else – and the something else is the transcendental dimension that you have to clarify. He was sensitive to people's sufferings and wanted to do something about that. As he was clearly very wounded himself, the concept of the wounded healer came very naturally to him. His spirituality emerged from the psychology to which he had been exposed. The wounded healer is both a profound spiritual concept and a profound psychological concept within a phenomenological, not a behaviourist, tradition. Henri found a way of connecting the two. In his pastoral counselling he would lead people from the level of psychology to the level of transcendence. Human experience had to be elucidated by reference to the Gospel but spirituality could not be disembodied from human experience. He was bringing together a particular kind of psychology and one that was not very popular in North America at all.

MF: So was he not appreciated by fellow psychologists?

PN: Some [people appreciated him], I would say, but it would probably be a fairly limited group … Among psychologists Henri was somewhat in a minority position.

MF: Why did he go back to Holland? Why didn't he stay at Notre Dame?

PN: It is an important question but the only thing I remember wanted to get his doctorate in theology. But exactly why he wanted that degree I don't remember.

MF: You went back to Holland. You saw him in the late sixties in Holland. Any stories from those days?

PN: The only thing I remember is his unhappiness about how is work was going or not going rather. And the relief when he made the decision to forgo it and go back to America?

MF: Why was he unhappy about the way his work was going?

PN: He was unhappy about being forced into a straitjacket. He knew he was doing something that was very much unlike him. His writing is not academic. It doesn't meet traditional academic standards.

MF: Yet I went through his notes on Hiltner and Boisen at Yale and they looked terribly academic.

PN: He could do that.

MF: But he didn't write for an academic audience. He didn't want to write academic books?

PN: Exactly.

MF: Why do you think he wanted to popularise? What was his motivation for that?

PN: Because he wanted to reach as many people as he could and he felt that many of the books that are written by academics don't do that. They reach a relatively small audience.

MF: He was quite uneasy in the academic world, wasn't he?

PN: Yes. I think partly, too, because he always wondered whether he was really appreciated there and he had good reason to wonder about that. I am sure there were always people who didn't think he belonged there. I m sure that was true at Yale. It was certainly true at Harvard. It may already have been somewhat true at Notre Dame.

MF: But for someone who loved pastoral work, he spent hardly any time in a parish.

PN: No. He would have been very good at that but I don't think that's where he thought his talents were. His talents were as a writer.

MF: As a writer drawing on psychology and spirituality, and trying to offer a message of hope? He obviously had a sense of vocation in all of that?

PN: Absolutely. He also had a vocation as a teacher. His writing, I think, is only another expression of being a teacher. In his writing he is a teacher. That is what he wanted to be. For quite some time he tried to establish whether he could be that in an academic setting. Harvard was the crunch.

MF: As a trained psychologist yourself, what did you make of the mind of your friend? What could you tell us about his own personality and state of mind?

PN: I think he was a deeply compassionate person. He was very curious. He was deeply interested and in a compassionate way about what went on in people. He was sensitive to people's suffering and he wanted to do something about that. He was driven. And he was a man full of tension. There was unrest in him and so in many ways he is a person full of contradictions. I think he wrote so well – and he wrote in a way that came across as being so authentic – because he wrote about issues with which he was very familiar. He wrote in someway about his own issues. Some of his own writing is almost a reminder to himself of what he should be doing and may not be doing all the time. He was sometimes very broken. He was very wounded and a concept like the wounded healer came naturally to him. He also saw the danger of that. He didn't want woundedness understood as 'I have my problems so I can now better understand yours.' It was at a much more fundamental level. The writing was in fact therapeutic for him. I think that's also why he wrote so much. Some people said he had an experience and had to rite about it. That was Henri's way of keeping it together I think.

MF: You talk about his own brokenness, the tensions within him, the woundedness. What was all this really about do you think?

PN: Well, he's pretty open about that himself. Certainly, in his most recent books, he talks about this desire to be loved, to be appreciated. And yet much of his writing is about getting freed from that and how important it is not to be striving for approval of other people and not to worry about whether one is loved or not. But that was a deep worry of his. It was a constant struggle.

MF: And how much can that be traced back to his upbringing?

PN: That's a good question. His father at one time told me that when Henri was just a little kid he would sometimes for days ask on several occasions, 'Do you love me? Do you love me?' The way the father talked about it, no matter what they did or said, the question would come. I don't know what that is about. His mother loved him. I think Henri was clearly seeking the approval of his father. Did he get that? I don't know for sure. I don't know enough about that relationship.

MF: In view of your experience, if someone were to ask you to psychoanalyse Henri could you do it?

PN: In many ways I would probably be too close to him in order to do that. There were struggles in him that I am aware of and that I can understand . But there were also struggles that I did not understand.

MF: Are you any to elaborate at all?

PN: To a certain extent I can understand the struggle about intimacy and the importance of feeling connected. But what I am not so clear about are exactly the origins of that. I have often wondered about that, especially in the light of the little anecdote the father told me. Henri's mother loved him unconditionally and, as a child, he was clearly seeking the approval of the father. The restlessness had something to do with the lack of certainty about being socially connected. If a person does not know for sure whether they are connected to somebody, they flounder and rush around to convince themselves that they are, in fact, connected; that people do like, approve of and appreciate them. The demon Henri had to fight from the very beginning and throughout his life was the uncertainty about being loved, more neutrally, the

uncertainty about being connected. That was a demon he fought all the time. He was losing the fight when he was overly sensitive to what his friends did or did not do. And he was losing the fight when he was running all over the place to give a lecture here or a lecture there. It was not only that. It's overly simplistic. There was always this double meaning. Many of the lectures were very good to at least a number of people in the audience but some of the motivation for doing that wasn't quite as altruistic but was an expression of the unrest. He knew that. When I talked with him, often my first question was 'Are you busy?' He would often say 'I am too busy. I told myself I would not take on as much but I have taken on too much. And he knew that part of that was an expression of that unrest and in that sense was fighting the demon. But in fighting the demon he was also helping people.

MF: But he was a public performer too. He was an actor. Nobody is denying he should have been like that. But he had a need to be revered.

PN: Right. That's for me all part of fighting the demon. In his writing you will see that he says 'you should never do something for that reason' but in fact it played a role, yes.

MF: Do you think that, after his breakdown and receiving therapy, Henri began to understand himself in a new light and to some extent overcame that demon or was it still lurking around?

PN: I think for a long time he understood what was happening it but the question was more did he learn to live with it more constructively. I think he did. Did he overcome it totally? I don't think so and I don't think he would have ever. That's the tragedy in a certain sense but also the strength of a person's life. That sounds terribly paradoxical but I have often wondered if, in any great person, the greatness isn't in learning to live constructively with the demons. It's not that they disappear but you learn with them in a way that neutralises them as much as possible.

The interview ended here. Later, Dr Naus referred me off-tape to the work of the British child psychiatrist John Bowlby in understanding some of Nouwen's early insecurities. He agreed to put his thoughts on record

MF: Could you explain the Bowlby theory?

PN: The theory suggests that foundations for relationships later in life are laid in early childhood in what Bowlby called 'secure attachment' of the child to his or her parents. If the attachment is secure, if the child from early on feels supported, loved and appreciated by the parents, he predisposes him or her to approach other relationships later in life with confidence and trust. Something similar was said by another psychologist Erik Erikson who, as you may know, has a theory about lifespan development in which he assumes that there are a number of different stages. The first stage he calls 'trust versus mistrust'. Again, there is that notion that the relationship of the child with the parent early in life is foundational for the social relationships. How would that fit with Henri? You could say that probably those who believe in Bowlby's theory that there are indications that Henri might not have been securely attached in the sense that he always seemed to be searching for affection and he was quite open about that. There are indications that Nouwen might not have been securely attached in that he always seemed to be searching for affection. Throughout his life he was never sure if people appreciated him. Bowlbians would tend to say Nouwen was not securely attached. But that begs the question, 'Why not?' We do not have first-hand information of his childhood to give evidence for it. What I know of the relationship between Nouwen and his mother suggests that there was a very strong attachment and one can only speculate why it was broken So one is tempted to say if one is a Bowlbian that Henri wasn't securely attached but that in a way begs the question 'Why not?' We don't have the information we need to answer that question because you would have to know a lot about what happened in the Nouwen family when Henri was growing up. I can only say that what I know about the relationship between Henri and his mother suggests there was a very strong attachment and one can only speculate why it was broken. One has to consider the possibility that, for whatever reason, Henri, almost at birth, had a need for security, affection and love that exceeded by far normally could be provided for a child. No matter what the parents did, that need Henri could not be fulfilled. It appears that something happened early in life, outside the control of the mother or the father, that somehow threatened, or disrupted, that bond.

APPENDIX TWO:

Interview with Michael Harank

Michael Harank worked as a part-time secretary for Nouwen at Harvard where they became close friends. Michael Harank, who has spent more than 20 years in the Catholic worker movement, subsequently ran Bethany House, a Catholic Worker house of hospitality for people living with HIV and AIDS, in Oakland, California. In his later years, Nouwen went there to give annual fund-raising lectures and to offer comfort to those who were in residence there. In November 1997 Michael Harank gave his first interview for the thesis which was incorporated within the first half of the text. However, as my researched broadened into issues about homosexuality and the priesthood, I felt it necessary to conduct a further interview with him. Michael Harank is a qualified nurse and openly gay. He has known many homosexual priests. The interview was undertaken in August 2000 while Harank was visiting friends in North Belfast. It contributed to the latter part of the thesis.

Michael Ford: To what extent do you think that denial and disguise are interconnected in the lives of gay Catholic priests?

Michael Harank: I think on a human level denial and disguise both have their place in the spectrum of human meaning. But I think denial can be a very important coping mechanism when one is not ready to deal with the darker or shadow side of who we are. Therefore disguise is the way in which us human beings are able to sometimes creatively, as in the theatre, to use disguise as a way of getting at the truth in a creative kind of way. Then there is the way in which disguise breeds a cesspool of secrecy which becomes a stagnant pool instead of the waters of creativity. With regard to the gay priests that I have known, the use of denial and disguise have not been creative ways of creating meaning out of the gift of sexuality that God has given to all of us. Sexuality is one of the ways we create meaning out of our lives and we carve out in certain kinds of ways the gifts that we then can present to God and say 'Do with this what I need to do to become more deeply human and therefore more deeply divine.' Precisely because sexuality has not been understood primarily as a gift, both for heterosexuals as well as being gay people - and being gay is even more difficult - it has stayed in that kind of stagnant waters of disguise and denial, and has caused a tremendous amount of suffering, primarily for gay priests themselves but also to the people that they serve. They end up murdering their brothers as in the story

of Cain and Abel because they are unable to acknowledge that sexuality is really a part of their own brotherhood. It is their brother. It is their friend. Gay people use denial and disguise to run away from what can be a great stirring water of the Holy Spirit. For gay priests, this terrible struggle can get expressed in unhealthy relationships with themselves and with others. Denial and disguise eventually create a kind of hell for them and the people they are around.

MF: In the film *Priest*, you see the priest taking off his collar, putting on his jacket and going into the gay bar. There's a sense that one identity is substituted for another, so the priest takes off his clerical disguise and puts on his gay attire. When he comes back he takes off his gay disguise and puts back on the clerical attire. What does that say about that person's identity?

MH: What I talked about before when I said that disguise and denial are ways in which people express meaning. That scene in which he does that basically describes the kind of spiritual schizophrenia that results from not being able to welcome a very essential part of what makes up our humanity which is our sexuality and the gift of our sexuality. If you can't accept that primary reality by which all of creation participates in, from the stars to the smallest insects, then you end up in society with people, especially priests, who are very dissociated and schizoid in their behaviour of who they are. They cannot integrate for many reasons – historical, philosophical, theological, spiritual – that's a very apt description of the reality that priests who are gay face. It's a terribly enclosed stagnant pool that represents basic areas of the church – the clerical church – because lay people are freer to be able to create a space themselves. My experience with gay priests has basically been there's no space within the communities, be they diocesan or religious, that offer a place of sanctuary for them to bring that gift to each other because there's such a terrible accumulation of guilt and repression and secrecy and suspicion around the issue of sexuality. They carry it around with them like a bag of bones. Instead of the great image of Ezekiel, creating this very living figure out of those bones, they can't do that because there's no place for them to do that within their communities, within the church, as clerics, as priests. So I think, to answer your question, that image in that film really does capture the kind of dissociation and schizophrenia and terrible friction that eventually has to break at some point. For Henri Nouwen that moment came when he fell in love with

Ball and found his passion unrequited. His spiritual and emotional world collapsed and he went into severe depression. But he began to live an incarnational life with the various aspects of himself he had denied.

MF: Was this an inevitable pattern?

MH: Yes, of course it was inevitable. If you're alive, it's inevitable. I think that depression led to, as we now can see through the publication of *The Inner Voice of Love* led to the beginnings of a process of reintegration, of truly living a kind of incarnational life with the various aspects of who he was. I think *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was probably one of his best books and one of the reasons why it was is because he was able to place himself in the various characters of that story, whether it be the jealous older brother or the prodigal son himself squandering his inheritance and that inheritance him as a sexual being, and then of course the father being the person who welcomes. In Rembrandt's painting, which Henri used, the fact that the father has a very masculine hand and a very feminine hand, and that kind of integration of the hands. Henri's hands were very powerful hands as anybody who knew him or witnessed his speaking engagements or celebrated Eucharist with him, his hands became one of the ways in which people experienced the wide embrace of God's unconditional love and compassion.

MF: How do you feel disguise was part of his way of operating and to what extent were his writings disguising the truth about himself?

MH: I thinking writing is always one of the ways in which we can both be truthful about who we are. It is an exercise in creating meaning out of the chaos and confusion of our lives. For Henri the chaos and the confusion that was caused by him being a gay man, he was able to touch through the word of writing those aspects of himself that caused a great deal of confusion and distress and anguish in his own life whether he was talking about the way in which people experience anxiety or depression or feeling unworthy, difficulty with self-esteem, people's burden of guilt and shame, all of those Henri was able to articulate that in writing. There's a way in which writing separates you from the actual living of the word – or can anyway – and the writing for Henri was a way in which to enter into that confusion to create some meaning out of

that, which he did not only for himself but certainly for the many, many people who read his books and somehow his books were able to touch that place of saying 'I'm not alone in my own confusion, in my anxiety, in my own spiritual journey whether I am a married person or a single person, a person with a disability. He was able through those words to touch the lives of many people. On the other hand, there is a way in which words and one's academic training in theology can become a disguise. They can become a way of distancing and of not really dealing with what's going on in your own life or certain parts of your own life.

MF: But those words that he used – he talked about alienation, loneliness, anxiety, depression – would probably have been classic traits of gay priests who were struggling. Through not being honest in his writings about that, he was actually disguising the roots of his own loneliness as a means of appealing to the greatest number of people. Some people may say there's a lack of honesty in all of that, do you think that his books could be hermeneutically interpreted as gay texts?

MH: I wouldn't call them gay texts. What I would call them is ways in which he tried to explore the myriad of emotions that gay people experience on their journey to coming-out. I think Henri was just at the very, very beginning of understanding the com-out process as a spiritual process, as a sacramental process. Henri understood in some very, very deep ways the sacramental nature of humanity. But again because of the context of him being a priest within an institutional setting, although he was pretty freed from that given the environments of the academic life at Yale and at Harvard, and ultimately at L'Arche where he was not so confined as other priests are by the institutional life, he was still very constricted. The other thing he had to deal with was the fear of actually coming-out and proclaiming part of who he was in the context of Catholicism and in an environment that can be and was often hostile and violent in its language towards sexuality and in particular towards queer sexuality. I see his writings and I think they did get better in claiming who he was, not just as a very articulate well educated man who is trying to make sense of his experience within the context of both the academic life and then his pastoral work at L'Arche. You can divide Henri's life for these purposes between what happened to him in the academic life where he was able to keep his sexuality at a critical distance and then when he went to L'Arche, where he was no longer in that environment, and was able to see day

after day the kind of brokenness of the body of the people that he worked with and how the brokenness of the body can become a sacrament. I think sexuality is a broken body in the life of the church and Henri was beginning to discover through his presence among people who were very, very broken in a physical kind of way beginning to see that he had to acknowledge that broken part of his body which was very, very deep, bone-marrow deep. He began to become much more comfortable in his body, even though he experienced all through his life this terrible anxiety around his body. I don't think he ever grew comfortable with it. The only time I ever saw him really comfortable with his body was actually, sadly to say, in his coffin because he had reached a certain kind of peace that surpasses understanding. I think that transition from the academic life to the pastoral community enabled him to get a little bit more in touch with what that meant as a broken part of his own body. It was before him everyday, as a pastor at L'Arche among physically and emotionally broken people, so he would have been terribly blind if he wasn't able to begin to acknowledge the areas in his own life where he had that brokenness, then the community would not have served him in a way that it did which was to make him more aware of that reality.

MF: In spite of all that latter-day awareness of sexuality and the body, he said he had been aged about six when he felt a vocation to the priesthood and knew he had a homosexual orientation. He was probably not alone in that. What does that say though about the Church? As one side of him is flowering, another is being suppressed. If sexuality and spirituality are interconnected, then it's perhaps not surprising that highly sensitive people discern these deeper stirrings at young ages. What's going on here psycho-spiritually in many priests' lives and to what extent do you think the current crisis in the priesthood is a result of this separation?

MH: Knowing the gay part of him at an early age, as many of us at an early age do know, but there being no space created to honour the gift or call out that gift in you, instead of a gift it becomes a great cross and a wound. And a wound that bleeds very deeply. When such a wound bleeds a lot without attention being paid to it, the person ends losing a lot of blood and a lot of life. That part of his life is not fed by the great symbol of life which is blood. It atrophies, it constricts and eventually causes death and the destruction of the body. Unlike the Native American communities that have

rituals that call out the various gifts in the community at a very young age and in particular two who are two-spirited within native communities. That gift is called out of them aged three to eleven or twelve. But the Catholic Church never developed any kind of ritual or sacred space to welcome that particular gift. Nouwen could not make sexuality part of his writings, his life or his intimate relationships and I think it was because of the fear. When a community does not call out a gift that is part of someone, as it does in Native American worlds, you develop a kind of Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde mentality and an emotional life which is skewed and afflicted. You enter into the lives of people, not as a person who is able to welcome the various gifts of other people, but as someone terribly frightened of the gift of being gay. You run in fright as animals do when they are being pursued by a perceived enemy. Isn't that what happened with the priest in the film *Priest* until he could run no more? For Henri and for many gay priests they reach a point where they have to make a decision and a choice about a process of integrating their sexuality and their spirituality. I just find a lot of the theological language around sexuality to be so spiritualised and out of the body that it's not very helpful. It's another way of avoiding the reality of God's creating us as sexual beings. If you don't pay attention to that, the 20the century is filled with psychologists who told us about the very horrible, distressing consequences of denying an essential, creative deep part of ourselves which is the erotic creative energy that is within each of us. For some of us there is a whole variety of ways in which that kind of energy, that sexuality, can be expressed as a gift into the community. Some people become almost become sexual healers through the various healing arts of massage, of touching, and some people utilise that energy in other kinds of creative ways to serve the needs of the community. But it's acknowledged so the veil of denial disappears and I often think of Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. Because she was able to acknowledge the sweat and the suffering that was a part of Jesus's movement to Calvary, it was only her being able to see that suffering in beads of sweat and blood that she was able to raise that veil of hers, to remove that veil of hers, and use that as a source of compassion and comfort in the life of Jesus and in her own life. She was able to take that herself. I wish Henri had in some ways explored the way in which Jesus calls out to Lazarus, his very dear friend, to come out of the tomb where he was wrapped in bandages which were stinking, and that image of the veil of gauze around the dead man. What essentially I think the church creates in gay priests are Lazaruses who are in tombs with bandages which are stinking. I think

Jesus calls out to every one of us but particularly to gay priests to come out of that darkness, that tomb, that stinking, stagnant pool and to begin a new life. I think, just as Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus, he weeps when anybody, but especially when gay priests are unable to acknowledge the suffering that they have been through and the havoc that that has caused: the suffering, the chaos and the confusion that that has caused in the church's life as well as the personal lives of gay priests. It doesn't end up being a healing power of resurrection and new life. It stays as a stagnant pool where nothing can grow.

MF: If we're moving towards a more integrated spirituality, do we have to try to veer towards a middle way which acts as a bridge between the masks which gay priests wear in order to conceal their own identity, not only from the community, but from themselves, but also the masks which the more 'out' gay community wear in perhaps denying the pain that does exist through the injustice? It's not a case of 'the other side' having it all together. Do you have any insights as to what sort of middle way might be forged or whether that is even possible?

MH: When you look at the whole concept of masks in the development of civilisation and culture, almost every culture utilises the mask as a way of communicating a certain lived emotion of our lives. The way in which, say, Indonesian masks or Native American masks, function in the community is that they allow the expression of the emotion that that mask represents in a very creative way, with music, with dance. It channels the raw energy and puts it into a recognisable face, and through that face is able to share its story with the community. Ultimately what life is about is being able to share one's story and one's own story is part of the collective story. It's the story of redemption, of salvation, of suffering which is made meaningful through the power of love. I feel the gay priests have only been wearing he masks of the negative emotions – the emotions of fears, of suspicion, of anxiety, of secrecy, of shame. Those are the only masks that gay priests have been facing the community with. I think we are coming to a time when we are beginning to be able to express the creative, healthy and integrated of masks that sexuality can foster within a community in a healthy kind of way. We are about to paint new masks of a sense of compassion, of solidarity, of connecting the suffering of gay people with other people who are marginalised and ostracised. E can create masks that bring out those dimensions of a redeemed life, of

truly living an incarnational, of really being able to be willing to be naked in the body as the Body of Christ, but using a mask as so many tribal rituals do to reveal the essence of who we are as God's children and as God's hands and feet and heart, and eyes in this world.

MF: That then enables you to be in solidarity with other people who are suffering?

MH: I think it creates an environment where justice, reconciliation, co-operation and compassion are possible. Before that I don't think it is possible because the masks of denial and disguise are not helpful in creating a deep awareness of unity. Jesus's deepest prayer was the prayer of unity – 'that they might be one'. You can only become one if you bring all of yourself to the table, to the altar, where the drama of our lives are enacted. The masks of sexuality in the church and among gay priests have been terribly dark, negative and menacing. I await the time when, with joy and with happiness (and I think that can come) where those new masks are created, masks that integrate the gift of sexuality that liberates people to be friends to one another.

MF: They're still masks are they?

MH: Yes, they're still masks. Sexuality is a very raw emotion that any human emotion. I think culture is about creating ways to channel that emotion in ways that promote a sense of reconciliation and unity because we are very fearful human beings. They are still masks and they have to be but they are creative masks, masks which reveal a sense of unity and the energy compassion, the energy of justice and the energy of solidarity. Even in the accounts of the Resurrection, there is a mask like quality in Jesus's presence in the new life. The disciples recognise that. That's also true when people have begun to integrate their sexuality and create the kind of meaning that enables us to acknowledge our humanity and the purpose of our humanity. Then we do create this different way of being. A person who is hidden in a dark closet, whether a victim of abuse or a victim of secrecy or shame, a victim of homophobia, they have a very different face than the one that has come out of the closet into the light, into the light that reveals and shadows at the same time.