

**SELF-SACRIFICE AND/OR SELF-LOVE?  
A PLEA FOR PROPER SELF-SACRIFICE AND  
PROPER SELF-LOVE  
AMONG THE VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS**

**HUONG MAI XUAN TRAN**

*Self-sacrifice is often considered both the loss of the self and the gift of the self for the goodness of others. This paradoxical expression of self-sacrifice invites us to reflect more in-depth about understanding the meaning of self-sacrifice. The quotidian act of self-sacrifice is often, if not always, attributed to female characteristics, in which women unconditionally give themselves for the good of their families. It visibly holds up the idea that women, through denying their own desires and expectations are given gifts for others. In other words, self-sacrifice is part of womanhood, as it manifests itself in the mindset of those who adhere to the Confucianist heritage culture. Providing that self-sacrifice is considered to be the opposite of self-love, women have no space for dignity and self-respect because they continually sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. Hence, a need to critically revisit the concept of self-sacrifice in Confucianist culture. Notably, a socially prescribed tradition of self-sacrifice is honored as a female virtue in the Vietnamese context. The traditional view likely venerates the excessive sacrifice of female beings for a good and harmonious family or community.*

*Nonetheless, morally speaking, whatever is excessive or deficient would not be considered a virtue. The issue, thus, is whether self-sacrifice is part of love for neighbors or merely a cultural ideology. This paper also focuses on the question of whether self-sacrifice should be seen as a denial of self-love or if it should be balanced with space for self-love, in other words, how to correctly understand the Christian command - love your neighbors as yourself (Mt 22:39).*

**Keywords:** Confucianism, self-sacrifice, obedience, self-love, loving your neighbor as yourself, Christian love.

## INTRODUCTION

Self-sacrifice might imply potential harm, a negation of self, but in general, it is considered diligent care for others inherited in human nature. Providing that self-sacrifice is the denial of self-love, women would have no space for their dignity and self-respect when they continually sacrifice for others for the sake of a self-sacrificial act rather than as agents. So, the question, “Where is the well-being and flourishing of women and men worldwide at stake”<sup>1</sup>, given the questions surrounding self-sacrifice, is still an engaging topic in some other cultures outside the Western world.

Take the Vietnamese context as an example. Christian concepts of self-sacrifice are, of course, not the only source for actions and narratives for Vietnamese people. Christianity is a very tiny minority in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the practice of self-sacrifice has long dominated this society and is still very present. It is treated as “a valuable source of nationalist spirit and great feminine virtues.”<sup>2</sup> In Vietnam, sacrifice – ‘*hy sinh*’ – is a daily moral practice, meaning “continual practice, experience, and moral orientation.”<sup>3</sup> This practice has various roots, such as the Confucian idea of feminine virtues, the state discourses of heroic mothers, and the Catholic teaching of self-denial.<sup>4</sup> According to American sociologist Merav Shohet, the daily practice of sacrifice in Vietnam embodies everyday interactions among Vietnamese who must respect the sociocultural ‘superior’, yielding to the sociocultural ‘inferior’. It is manifest in “people’s linguistic and corporeal practices of everyday interactions, including politely greeting seniors, speaking in a

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Douglas and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, “Revisiting Valerie Saiving’s Challenge to Reinhold Niebuhr: Honoring Fifty Years of Reflection on ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View’: Introduction and Overview,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1 (2012): 77.

<sup>2</sup> Yuqing Du, “The Ethics of Sacrifice: Marriage and Women in an Urban Catholic Community of Ho Chi Minh City,” unpublished dissertation of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS (University of London, 2019), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Merav Shohet, *Silence, and Sacrifice: Family Stories of Care and the Limits of Love in Vietnam* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Du, “The Ethics of Sacrifice,” 246.

manner of politeness, expressions of gratitude, and acts of obedience towards the senior bodies.”<sup>5</sup> The daily moral practice of sacrifice enables individuals, families, and the state to hold self-sacrifice as an ideal virtue. Each person is expected to curtail “affective expression” and embrace “suffering in silence for the sake of one another.”<sup>6</sup>

While there are a few, present studies<sup>7</sup> in Vietnam do not discuss the link with self-love, being also part of Vietnamese women’s flourishing. Therefore, the question of how Vietnamese women who engage in self-sacrifice create, at the same time, a safe moral space that persuades their self-love still stands. The discussion of self-sacrifice can only be complete if the concept of self-love is also addressed. Therefore, this article proposes a plea for proper self-sacrifice and proper self-love among Vietnamese

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>6</sup> Merav Shohet, “Troubling Love: Gender, Class and Sideshadowing the ‘Happy Family’ in Vietnam,” *Ethos* 45, no. 4 (2017): 556.

<sup>7</sup> I list here some present studies that have been studies by both local and foreign researchers. For example, Rita Liljeström and Tuong Lai eds., *Sociological Studies on the Vietnamese Family* (Oakland: Masalai Press, 1991). Tine Gammeltoft, *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Worries: Health and Family Planning in a Vietnamese Rural Community* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999). Thi Binh Do, “Gender Relation in Vietnam-Traditional and Modern,” in *Asian Values and Vietnam’s Development in Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Irene Norlund and Pham Duc Thanh, 182-189 (Hanoi: National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, 2000). Ashley Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Song Ha Vu, “The Harmony of Family and the Silence of Women: Sexual Attitudes and Practice among Rural Married Women in Northern Vietnam,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2008): 163-176. Van Hanh Thi Do and Marie Brennan, “Complexities of Vietnamese Femininities: A Resource for Rethinking Women’s University Leadership Practices,” *Gender and Education* 27, no. 3 (2015): 273-287. Dinh Sang Tran and Mai Trong An Vinh, “Filial Piety Education for Vietnamese Students Today,” *Journal of Education and Practice* 12, no. 6 (2021): 61-64. Merav Shohet, “Everyday Sacrifice and Language Socialization in Vietnam: The Power of a Respect Particle,” *The American Anthropological Association* 115, no. 2 (2013): 203-217. Also, Merav Shohet, *Silence and Sacrifice: Family Stories of Care and the Limits of Love in Vietnam* (California: University of California Press, 2021). Cao Khai Tran, “Discussion about Catholic Marriage and Family,” *Pastoral-Catholic Family- The Vietnamese Bishops Conference* (2022), <https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/ban-ve-duc-hy-sinh-trong-doi-song-hon-nhan-gia-dinh-ki-to-huu-46567#> [accessed March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023].

Catholic women, taking into consideration women's ethically inspired devotion to the family and community. That plea uncovers the Christian twofold love: love for your neighbor as yourself.

To advance the understanding of self-sacrifice within Vietnamese culture, this paper will employ a critical analysis discourse to revisit briefly the Vietnamese cultural features concerning self-sacrifice. Then, I will also analyze the concept of self-sacrifice out of love from a Vietnamese Catholic's point of view. Within Vietnamese Catholicity, the question of the relation between self-sacrifice and self-love is an important question. Finally, we will defend an inextricable link between sacrifice and self-love to contribute to the flourishing of everyone, especially Vietnamese women.

### **VIETNAMESE CULTURAL IDEOLOGY OF SELF-SACRIFICE**

Under the influence of Confucian ethics for almost a thousand years, Vietnamese culture highly values ritual tradition, proper manners, and behaviors, which are the presumptions to keep social order.<sup>8</sup> The ritual practice is called “*lễ*” - rite, which corresponds to its original ancestor worship. Ancestor worship connects one to the lineage's ancestor spirit. Neo-Confucianism<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> William Theodore De Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> It is a fact that Confucianism was adopted in Vietnam in the first century, but it strongly influenced the Vietnamese from the Le dynasty (1428-1527). Although Confucius and his disciples, like Mencius, proposed a good foundation for forming a person and strengthening the familial relationship, then building up a just and ordered society, the royal rulers in Vietnam imposed the adopted Confucianism that might ignore its original meaning and interpreted it according to the political-ideological systems. It aimed to sustain the social order. See Stephen O'Harrow, “Vietnamese Women and Confucianism: Creating Spaces from Patriarchy,” in *Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia*, edited by Wazar Jahan Karim, 161-180 (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1985). Also, Jaeyeon Lucy Chung, *Korean Women, Self-Esteem, and Practical Theology: Transformative Care* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2017), 45. Thus, I prefer to call it neo-Confucianism in the Vietnamese context.

respects the hierarchical system<sup>10</sup> within society in general and the family in particular. Thus, “*lễ*” does not only regard spiritual practice but is concrete about the moral obligation of filial piety.

Filiality is an indispensable characteristic that each person should be qualified for in their familial relationships. It is an obligation that children must honor and respect their parents and grandparents. The obligation of filiality is justified because the parents gave their children life, love, and care. It entails that the children are responsible for obeying their parents if they are alive, worshipping them when they pass away, and maintaining a harmonious kinship among brothers and sisters.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it pervades most aspects of Vietnamese life and is based on the premise that parents have always sacrificed for their children, so the children are mandated to show filial piety. According to Shoheit, filiality is a so-called “unrepayable debt of gratitude” children receive from their parents. In the Vietnamese social matrix of hierarchy, “sacrifice is parallel to and complements filial piety.” However, she distinguishes between filiality and sacrifice. The former is an “upward-directed respect and solicitousness” that the subordinators express to their superiors, but the latter is a “bidirectional reciprocity.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, sacrifice is bidirectional care because the below respect those above, and the above care for the below.

An interviewee from Shoheit’s project in Vietnam explains her understanding of sacrifice:

*Sacrifice refers to difficulties that [one] directs towards oneself, whereas when there’s something advantageous [one] secures it for [one’s] father, for [one’s] mother, for [one’s] husband and children...Sacrifice doesn’t just mean fighting in wars; the term includes a lot of*

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<sup>10</sup> The hierarchical system is known as five relationships between the king and his subjects, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, between friends. John Knobloch, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol.3 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Sang Tran Dinh and Vinh Mai Trong An, “Filial Piety Education for Vietnamese Students Today,” *Journal of Education and Practice* 12, no. 6 (2021): 61-62.

<sup>12</sup> Shoheit, *Silence, and Sacrifice*, 72.

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meanings, so when you talk of sacrifice, it means accepting suffering for oneself...hoping that [the beneficiaries] don't know about your sacrifice, right? For example, [if] you sacrifice, but you have to say that you sacrifice, that's really ugly... Sacrifice is mute and secretive.<sup>13</sup>

Silent sacrifice is valuable because women are expected to take responsibility for the honor of their masters (fathers, husbands, and sons), known as the Three Submissions.<sup>14</sup> Also, by practicing the Four Virtues (work, appearance, speech, and principles), women preserve the harmony and prosperity of the family.<sup>15</sup> Those virtues are traditionally counted as feminine virtues. As the Confucianist cultural code says, women are submissive to men within socio-familial relationships. The submissive character of women within a patriarchal society entails the ideal sacrifice by which women should silently and willingly take on hardships for the sake of others. While they are excluded from the social sphere, their virtuous performance is perceived as the value of their existence.<sup>16</sup>

The traditional female role has been continually shaped during the French colonization and wartime. Under the Communist regime, this feature was officially abandoned due to the economic reformation<sup>17</sup> in 1986. However, through the Vietnamese Women Union's (VWU)<sup>18</sup> work, the state still

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Rita Liljestrøm and Tuong Lai, eds., *Sociological Studies on the Vietnamese Family* (Oakland: Masalai Press, 1991), 29, 48-49, 75-79.

<sup>15</sup> Ha M. T. Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-coloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 90.

<sup>16</sup> Hellen Rydstrom, *Embodying Morality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 118.

<sup>17</sup> In 1986, the Communist Party launched a *Đổi Mới* (Reformation) policy by which its residents were allowed to boost foreign investment and private business. Thus, the Vietnamese economy rapidly developed. See Ingrid Grosse, "Gender Values in Vietnam - Between Confucianism, Communism and Modernization," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 3, no.2 (2015): 255.

<sup>18</sup> The Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU) was founded in 1930. It was based on the premise that communism and socialism are the only routes that

effectively eases the discursive mode of sacrifice to discipline women on endurance, faithfulness, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Those features are considered female virtues and are unique to the national discourse. The selfless love of women for their children, husbands, and the nation is shown by sacrificing their own interests for their families and the nation.<sup>19</sup> Women are oppressed by their husbands and in-laws, who are often more conservative in the backwardness of the Confucian tradition. Outsiders have a lot of critique of this practice. For instance, Hellen Rydström, a Swedish sociologist, criticized the national-socialist cause through the 'Happy Family' campaign. She claims that that campaign inevitably enables women to enter an accepted zone of domestic violence. Being more positive than Rydström's focus on women's oppression, Shohet supposes that the "practice of sacrifice (*hy sinh*) and love (*tinh cảm*) keep families knotted together; any cohesion or continuity that families achieve, however, is precarious: it involves suffering and hard work to sustain and sometimes runs up against the limits of love."<sup>20</sup> In his ethnographic investigation of the middle-class women in Hanoi, Ashley Pettus shows that Vietnamese women, in some parts, are repressed in the form of "spirituality". The reason is that they are confined to a web of cultural codes and obligations about domestic roles (being wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers), rather than being themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Those arguments are constantly deepened within socio-anthropological studies and gender-based perspectives of female subordination within a hierarchical system. Female sacrifice is often

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liberate women, whereas capitalist societies are morally corrupt systems that seek to maintain patrilineage and oppress women. See David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 235-236. The VWU's primary role is to serve the Communist Party, so "whatever identified as women's rights and interests must be compatible with and beneficial for the Party's political priorities and goals." Its function is the state's propaganda. See Hoang Lan Anh, "The Vietnamese Women's Union and the Contradictions of a Socialist Gender Regime," *Asian Studies Review* 44, no. 2 (2020): 300.

<sup>19</sup> Ashley Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Shohet, *Silence and Sacrifice*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 211.

seen as part of women's nature, so their sacrifices might be easily neglected by family members and the community to which they belong. At the same time, Vietnamese women have recently been directed to abundant choice and freedom within modernization processes and new socio-economic developments. However, the forcing performance of being a good Vietnamese woman restrains many from their self-performance.<sup>22</sup> In the religious domain, besides having the purpose of becoming good women, Vietnamese Catholic women would also nurture their lives to become good Catholic followers. Yuqing Du argues that the sacrifice of Vietnamese Catholic women in their marital sphere is a way of achieving their self-realization.<sup>23</sup> Du does not frame "a passive picture of women's agency in Vietnam" but sees self-realization in the way that women take on the roles of a "sacrificing mother," a "virtuous Catholic wife," and an "obedient daughter-in-law" through the ethics of self-sacrifice.<sup>24</sup>

### ***LOVE AND SELF-SACRIFICE IN VIETNAMESE CATHOLICISM***

The understanding of "love entwines the relations of *tình cảm* - care love, *tình yêu* - romantic love, and *tình thương* - affectionate/pity love."<sup>25</sup> The three distinctions of one concept are profoundly related to the fact that love is seen as a presupposition of self-sacrifice. '*Tình cảm*' is a way of showing care to loved ones. It is preferably used to show parent-child relations, in which parents sacrifice their whole lives to bring up their children, who, in turn, will obey their parents and care for the parents' needs in their old age. It can also be used in the context of siblings and friends. When one cares for others, their '*Tình cảm*' obviously includes the material needs. '*Tình yêu*' is distinctly rendered as the romantic and intimate relationships between couples and lovers. The third one,

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<sup>22</sup> Lan Anh Hoang, "Moral Dilemmas of Transnational Migration: Vietnamese Women in Taiwan," *Gender & Society* 30, no. 6 (2016): 891-892.

<sup>23</sup> Du, "The Ethics of Sacrifice," 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Shohet, *Silence and Sacrifice*, 557.

‘*tình thương*’, is understood in a broader context, such as love for neighbors and others whose situations and vulnerability touch the agent’s heart. The meaning of love, including ‘*tình cảm*’, ‘*tình yêu*’, or ‘*tình thương*’, is always an other-regarding disposition of giving oneself in an act of loving. Shohet observes that the practice of ‘love’ in Vietnam is normally related to material concerns. Her observation is true that people’s love is easily expressed by giving material gifts.<sup>26</sup> However, love is of course more than merely an external expression via material-based gifts.

Christian love, commonly understood in its twofold dimensions - towards God and toward others - guides Catholics to live faithfully to God and with others, especially their fellow inhabitants. This gave birth to unified Catholic communities. Especially in Vietnam, this strong unity was clear during the persecution and repression of the Catholic Church under the local kings<sup>27</sup> in the previous centuries and during the Vietnamese Communist period.<sup>28</sup> The sacrificial love of Christ, who laid himself on the Cross to save the world from sin, is a profound aspect of Christian love. The sacrifice of the martyrs in the past strongly stands for the image of the crucified Christ, who was willing to empty himself for the sake of human sinfulness. Thus, imitating Christ’s sacrificial love by self-giving to others is regarded as a laudable practice by every Vietnamese Catholic.

At the dawn of Christianity in Vietnam, Catholicism was known as ‘*Đạo yêu thương*’ - ‘the religion of love.’ Notably, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has built a keen sense of community

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Under King Minh Mang (1820-1840), King Thieu Tri (1841-1847), and King Tu Duc (1847-1883), there were about 40.000 Catholics being executed due to some allegations that the Catholics abandoned the cults of ancestor and demolished the traditional custom. See Phan Phat Huon, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam* (Long Beach: Cuu The Tung Thu, 2000), 513.

<sup>28</sup> The early Communist regime kept hold of absolute political control, so it did not give freedom to the Catholics. See Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 243. They destroyed many Church buildings, banned religious practice, and controlled candidates for Catholic priests and nuns. The so-called re-education camp was imposed on priests and religious orders.

from its beginning, reflecting on its perseverance during persecution. They believe that the Holy Spirit has guided the Church and its pastors. Thus, the communal dimension of Vietnamese Catholicism and the strong interpersonal relationships between the clergy and the faithful have created a foundation for unconditional trust and obedience toward the leaders of the Catholic Church.<sup>29</sup>

Although there was significant suspicion and division in Vietnamese society when Christianity became widespread, Vietnamese Catholics tried to practice mutual love and support among each other to endure hardships and difficulties during political downturns. They encouraged each other to be faithful and grateful while seeing their “love for Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Also, the inspiration of the so-called ‘religion of love’ inspired them to carry out love to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It is, for example, an essential part of the life of Andrew Dung Lac, one of the Vietnamese martyrs, who spent his youth aiding the priests and serving the Church to the point of bloodshed. His martyrdom reassured the contemporary faithful to be continually faithful to the love of God to which he gave himself.<sup>31</sup> Even some Vietnamese fellows who persecuted the Christian faith were astonished because the Catholics consciously showed love and forgiveness towards their executors and traitors, as Jesus himself taught.<sup>32</sup> Also, Cardinal F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, who was imprisoned for thirteen years, always showed love to the officers who treated him like an enemy.

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<sup>29</sup> Nhue A. D. Nguyen, “Theological reflection on the Vietnamese Martyrs for today,” in *Martyrs in Asia*, ed. Fabrizio Meroni, 45-56 (Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 2019), 52, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Thanh Vu, *Heroic Blood: The Story of the Persecutions of Catholicism in Vietnam* (New Orleans: no publisher, 2020), 45-48.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, “Beatification of 44 Servants of God. Homily of the Holy Father,” March 5, 2000, accessed December 28, 2022, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20000305\\_beatifications.html/](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000305_beatifications.html/).

<sup>32</sup> Nguyen, “Theological reflection on the Vietnamese Martyrs for today,” 52.

## THE IDEAL SELF-SACRIFICE FOR VIETNAMESE CATHOLIC WOMEN

The Latin word ‘*sacrificium*’ means to ‘make holy’, ‘dedicate,’ and ‘perform holy actions.’<sup>33</sup> For Vietnamese Catholics, self-sacrifice is, first, a religious habit that shows a life of devotion in prayers, supporting a happy family within the Catholic marital bond, and serving the Church and her activities as much as possible. Their devotions are considered actions of self-sacrifice by which Catholics are enabled to obtain the state of being pious Catholics. For example, Vietnamese Catholics believe self-sacrifice is proved by attending Mass and praying with the Church community. Praying, especially the rosary, is what most Catholics are devoted to. Through prayers, they entrust their adversities to God’s help and the intercession of Mother Mary, the model of a sacrificial woman. Thus, for Catholics, prayer participation is regarded as “an instrument of enhancing faith and reconciling conflicts,” and it keeps harmony.<sup>34</sup> Some Catholics also believe that participation in Mass and prayers is the spiritual strength that helps them endure and navigate adversity.

According to Du, prayer is a gender-based practice in Vietnamese churches. The prayer session the Church organizes every night is where the women can “temporarily escape the household chores and suffocating in-law relations.”<sup>35</sup> So, as homemakers, Catholic women are expected to fulfill all domestic duties and sacrifice when coping with marriage rifts. Faithfully and devotedly taking part in prayers encourages women to meet the family’s role as caregivers. Although it is true in some respects that women devote more to prayers than men do, Vietnamese Catholic men are also dedicated to prayers. Participation in prayers is inclusive for all members of the Church; that is nurtured through

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<sup>33</sup> Claudia Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-sacrifice,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 50 (2008): 238.

<sup>34</sup> Angela Coco, *Catholics, Conflicts and Choices: An Exploration of Power Relation in the Catholic Church* (Durham: Routledge, 2013). See Du, “The Ethics of Sacrifice,” 129.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

the daily prayer of family members. As Fr. Nhue Nguyen said, the practice of faith is a duty of both females and males in Vietnamese Catholics. It is evidently in the faithful life of the martyrs. Among 117 Vietnamese martyrs, there is only one female martyr, St. Agnes Le Thi Thanh. They witnessed their faith through prayers and in death.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the practice of faith among the Vietnamese Catholics is not a gender-distinguished matter, as Du claimed.

Vietnamese women are expected to be '*hiền*' – virtuous, the most frequent term referring to “innate’ womanly goodness”. Traditionally, '*hiền*' is prominently connected to the Vietnamese female role of being a wife and mother. Women who are addressed as '*hiền*' validate the submissive status of being women. That '*hiền*' perspective equipped women with the ability to be endurance-minded and flexible amidst their adversities. Women are, thus, supposed to fulfill the socio-defined role. Indeed, the ideal self-sacrifice associated with the '*hiền*' characteristic calls women to accept their place in men's life circle of sacrificing mothers, devoted wives, and pious Catholics. Their self-worth is associated with their “relationships with others and the way they respond to others’ needs.” By doing so, they are unlikely to run away from social and religious requirements that might “deprive them of the power to change to a better life” through other people's gossip and judgments, even if they are marginalized from their neighborhood and Catholic communities.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, women are withdrawn from their ability for life changes, leading them to passively accept their fate when sad things happen in their marriage. For example, self-sacrifice is significantly embodied in the sacrament of marriage, distinguishing it from a non-Catholic marriage. Marriage in the Catholic tradition aims for the good of the couple, procreation, and the offspring's interests.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, it emphasizes the essential properties of

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<sup>36</sup> Nguyen, “Theological reflection on the Vietnamese Martyrs for today,” 54.

<sup>37</sup> Du, “The Ethics of Sacrifice,” 207-208.

<sup>38</sup> Code of Canon Law, 1983, accessed March 2, 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib4-cann998-1165\\_en.html#TITLE\\_VII](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib4-cann998-1165_en.html#TITLE_VII). According to the code of Canon Law, art. 1055, “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a lifetime partnership, ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the

Catholic marriage: unity and indissolubility. Those properties are distinct from traditional marriage, such as polygamy, and avoid the current issue of divorce in contemporary society. Through her fieldwork experience, Du found no polygamy marriages, fewer divorces, and rare interfaith marriages in several parishes where she conducted the fieldwork. Interfaith marriage is rare because most non-Catholic partners are expected to convert to Catholicism before their wedding ceremony.<sup>39</sup> Catholic parents often remind their children that they must choose Catholic lovers. If not, they will have to consider persuading their lovers to be baptized in the Catholic Church. Otherwise, their relationship will not be accepted by the family.

Given the conflicts that cause the increasing fragility of marital bonds, the first thing that comes to Catholic couples' minds, especially the women, is the Church law of indissolubility. Indeed, the indissolubility of Catholic marriage does not allow divorce, so they must do their best to remain in their matrimonial covenant. While marriage among Catholics can be annulled if that marriage is found with one of the impediments, for example, an arranged marriage, by which the couple might lack their free will, most Catholics believe that marriage includes love and responsibility. It departs from love, but responsibility keeps marriage lasting. While love between couples might dwindle after years, the responsibility for the family and towards their children should never fade. Responsibility for the well-being of children encourages couples to make every endeavor to guarantee their marriage and, as such, underlines the sacrifice each party should make to nurture conjugal harmony. That responsibility, thus, reflects the practice of sacrifice.<sup>40</sup>

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procreation and education of the offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized.”

<sup>39</sup> Du, “The Ethics of Sacrifice,” 146, 154.

<sup>40</sup> Cao Khai Tran, “Bàn về Đức Hy Sinh trong Đời Sống Hôn Nhân Gia Đình Kitô Hữu,” *Mục Vụ-Gia Đình – Trang mạng Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam* (2022). [ET: “Discussion about Catholic Marriage and Family,” *Pastoral-Catholic Family-The Vietnamese Bishops Conference*, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/ban-ve-duc-hy-sinh-trong-doi-song-hon-nhan-gia-dinh-ki-to-huu-46567#>.

The idea of sacrifice is also encouraged because of the gender differences between males and females. The Vietnamese Church has perceived that gender differences are the primary reasons for marital conflicts.<sup>41</sup> The male is considered more reasonable, while the female is presented as more emotional. It looks somehow like what William B. Wilcox, an American sociologist, refers to as the so-called ‘soft patriarchs,’ in which a man might treat his wife well but does not necessarily contribute to housework and childrearing.<sup>42</sup> Understandably, from within this mentality, one accepts that the male lacks consideration for details in the house, and accepts his absence from home, drinking habits, and violent disposition. On the other hand, a woman’s nature is to reconcile the differences in favor of her daily self-sacrifice. According to the Catholic stance, self-sacrifice is the way of sanctification. The practice of self-giving in the marital and familial domains is considered to sanctify the family in uniting with Christ’s sacrifice for human salvation. Catholic women are often encouraged to pray more while facing marital conflicts or seeking a solution to keep their marriage. Indeed, here, one can claim that the one who loves will sacrifice herself for the goodness of the beloved, rather than for her own interests. It is correct to encourage a bit of sacrifice among

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<sup>41</sup> The Committee on the Doctrine of the Faith from the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Vietnam says, “Men are more suitable for manual labor; they are more likely to focus on their work. Women are more suitable for time-consuming and less intensive work. Men tend to pay attention to the big picture and the cardinal while they reason according to principles. They judge objectively based on reality, while women focus on the details and reason according to intuition. Thus, they make judgments subjectively based on their sentiments. Men view romantic relations as one of the important aspects, and when in love, men are more active. Women assess love as everything in their lives, so a woman is ready to give her all when in love. In terms of religious faith, men are not as devout but lasting. It is hard to abstain from fornication and remain chaste. Women are more pious, emotional, and detailed, but it is easy to change their faith, and hard to maintain that universal love.” See Ủy Ban Giáo Lý Đức Tin, eds. *Giáo Lý Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình (Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam, 2014)*, 83. [ET: Committee on the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catholic Teachings on Marriage and Family*, Catholic Bishop’s Conference].

<sup>42</sup> William Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

family members and the Church community but in the case of victimizing oneself,<sup>43</sup> any self-sacrifice is meaningless.

The obliged obedience in Confucian thought requires Vietnamese women to conform their roles to their male counterparts. Obedience is a self-sacrificial act that respects patriarchal relationships and supports a stable society. At the same time, Vietnamese Catholics, rooted in Confucianism-based relationships, underscore obedience in all aspects of life. It is presupposed that self-sacrifice is an effective disposition for being a devoted Catholic. Obedience in Vietnamese is ‘*Vâng Phục*.’ It is a noun combined with two verbs, ‘*vâng*’ and ‘*phục*.’ ‘*Vâng*’ means an act of acknowledgment or agreement or an expression of polite response toward older persons. Moreover, ‘*Phục*’ expresses a performance of being submissive, respecting, listening to the superior bodies with both mind and heart and serving others. Therefore, ‘*vâng phục*’ is an obedient act with submissive performance and deep reverence for the authority of the superiors.<sup>44</sup> The attitude expressed in obedient deeds might carry a sense of fear and duty.<sup>45</sup> The feeling of fear is also reverence for sources that motivate one to obey and not allow individuals to become outsiders of a particular group through disobedient actions. In addition, acting obediently toward superiors might contribute to fulfilling his or her duties. In doing so, obedience often asks people to give up their wishes and desires.

Thus, in Vietnamese vocabulary, there is a distinction between ‘*vâng phục*’ - obedience with love and respect, and ‘*vâng mà không phục*’ - obedience without love and respect. Indeed, obeying someone with love and respect will give meaning to obedient acts, which can be considered an expression of sacrificial love. It might bring happiness to those who sacrifice their own well-being. It can

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<sup>43</sup> Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-sacrifice,” 239, 242. If self-sacrifice implies self-denying in all things, it will mean that the self disappears entirely. In that case, the sacrificial agent neither denies his/her own means nor the relation to the involved parties. It is the “renunciation of recognition and reciprocity in love.”

<sup>44</sup> Hội Khai Trí Tiến Đức, *Việt Nam Tự Điển (Vietnamese Dictionary)* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Mới, 1954), 47, 629. See Phê Hoàng, *Tự Điển Tiếng Việt (Vietnamese Dictionary)* (Hà Nội: NXB Tự Điển Bách Khoa, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Tran, “Toward a More Profound Reciprocity,” 121.

also become necessary to bring harmony to families or communities. On the other hand, obedience without love and respect will easily become an annoying obligation that cannot be avoided because of hierarchical relationships. It carries a passive attitude - Vietnamese people often say '*hy sinh đĩ*' - 'let's sacrifice.' That passive attitude is acceptable to them because they are taught to opt for a higher value and disregard their own needs.

The Vietnamese women, in general, and the Vietnamese Catholics, in particular, learned to value the idea of self-sacrifice in ordinary life. However, self-realization is still lacking on the side of the inferior. Self-sacrifice plays a significant role in preserving marital relationships as well as the harmonious atmosphere of the family or community. The sacrificial aspect of life is still highly valuable for those who traditionally preserve the asymmetrical relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, superior and subordinated. Those values seem to be inadequate and are considered an old-fashioned form of living in the post-economic revolution. People focus more on their individual concerns. Regardless of love, either women who prolong the traditional view or those who try to get away from traditional values, would acknowledge the practice of self-sacrifice as an incomplete reality.

Indeed, Christian theology emphasizes the significance of the theology of the Cross, self-sacrifice. Within the bloody history of Vietnamese Catholicism, self-sacrifice is the predominant virtue as the antidote to self-pride and selfishness, which is considered a human sinful nature. This traditional understanding of self-sacrifice might reinforce one's servitude to others unless one gains a proper development of the self. Regarding this viewpoint, feminist voices, such as Judith Plaskow, Susan Nelson, Barbara Andolsen, and Margaret Farley, to name a few, often criticize the sacrificial role of a woman as a "male-oriented interpretation."<sup>46</sup> It fails to value women's self-development. Therefore, self-sacrifice and self-realization are two sides of the same coin.

In the letter to the women in 1995, St. John Paul II addressed that "Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged,

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<sup>46</sup> Chung, *Korean Women, Self-Esteem, and Practical Theology*, 51-52.

and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves.”<sup>47</sup> Such thinking might lead to a considerable disadvantage of humanity. According to the Pope, however, it is necessary to acknowledge the ‘genius of women’ by considering their ordinary womanhood at the service of others because they recognize other persons with their hearts. By doing so, they fulfill their deepest vocation as God’s gift at the beginning of creation. Thus, “womanhood is part of the essential heritage of mankind and of the Church herself.”<sup>48</sup>

### A SPACE FOR PROPER SELF-LOVE?

The Vietnamese conviction of love is highly related to self-sacrifice. The act of self-sacrifice is only for the sake of others. The other-regard love might threaten the selfhood of a subject who is only devoted to self-sacrifice. In that case, the question is whether self-sacrifice and self-love are excluded. The two-fold commandment of Christian love is “love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” If we believe that loving one’s neighbors *as oneself* is a significant aspect of Christian love, we can admit that this second aspect is neglected in the practice of Vietnamese (female) Catholics due to the cultural norm of filiality and obedience. Women are expected to reconcile their marital conflicts because of their responsibility, ‘motherly nature’, and ‘wifely duties’. However, how can self-sacrifice be possible if there is no space for self-love? Let us think of Groenhout’s thought: the paradox of self-sacrifice pervades because “the self that is emptied must continue to exist as a self to be emptied.”<sup>49</sup> If self-sacrifice is just self-annihilation, the agent of the sacrificial act would have nothing to offer. Self-sacrifice as self-annihilation entails ignoring

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<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, “The Letter to Women,” Vatican June 29, 1995, #3, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_29061995\\_women.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html) [accessed October 25, 2023].

<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, “The Letter to Women,” #12.

<sup>49</sup> Ruth E. Groenhout, “Kenosis and Feminist Theory,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, 291-312 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 301.

the phrase ‘as yourself,’ which is also part of the double love command for Christians. Denial of the self might become another obstacle to recognizing oneself as a unique creature of God’s creation.

According to Confucian scholar Wei-Ming Tu, the idea of the self is developed in the center of one’s relationship. He refers to a famous Confucian dictum; “In order to establish myself, I establish others; in order to enlarge myself, I enlarge others.”<sup>50</sup> This dictum indicates the significance of self-cultivation which is “a deliberate communal act” to broaden and deepen the self in “an ever-expanding circle of human relatedness.”<sup>51</sup> One is definitely conscious of the presence of others in one’s self-cultivating journey. Thus, cultivating self-worth is a shared experience among humanity. Self-cultivating is necessary to promote proper self-love. Self-love, in Greek literature, is considered proper when it neither manipulates nor excludes others to the extent of excessive love for the self. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives self-love, which serves either vicious or virtuous deeds. The act of self-love is vicious when anyone loves him/herself beyond a reasonable limit. Self-love is proper and acceptable when the one who loves him/herself in a respectful manner does not hurt others for his/her achievement.<sup>52</sup> Self-love can also relate to classical *eudaimonia* views. They suppose that “a person’s life goal ought to be flourishing, or happiness, and that this is achieved by moral excellence. They thus shared the belief that the good life is performed by an agent, not merely something that happens to that agent.”<sup>53</sup> The most potent form of this view is that when one exercises virtue, one will flourish. On the other hand, its weaker form shows that a flourishing life is still seen in people who do not care much about responsibility. Yet, if one only cares about one’s own happiness, he/she is selfish. In the *City of God*, Augustine believed Christians were appropriately tailored

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<sup>50</sup> Wei-Ming Tu, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 57.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 146-147.

<sup>53</sup> Jesse Couenhoven, “Eudaimonism, Virtue, and Self-sacrifice,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, no. 1 (2019): 8.

towards happiness, which was construed to unite with goodness. Hence, for Augustine, nothing was problematic if one was selfish about this expectation of happiness.<sup>54</sup> However, he added, care for one's happiness should be subordinate to one's love for God.<sup>55</sup> Also, the medieval thinker Bernard of Clairvaux distinguished self-love as love for God's sake.<sup>56</sup> Understanding self-love, which is to love oneself for God's sake, is an ultimate degree of love. One might question whether it is possible for human beings to gain such an ultimate degree of love on earth.

The theological discovery of self-love would contribute to what we should understand of proper self-love, which is defined by human beings' relational nature, its movements toward the good, and the divine model of love. First, self-love is relational in its distinctive nature; that also entails the other-regard aspect of love because relational love is not merely an encounter but an exchange of meaning between the involved parties.<sup>57</sup> Because of the meaning exchange, each one should create an environment that meets his/her requirements for life.<sup>58</sup> Within this environment, one can understand him/herself truly and rightly in his/her relations with others. Outka displays self-love as a precondition for loving others, and in return, loving others entails some affirmation of the self. He also affirms that "our self-love can serve as a model for what

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<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *The City of God (XI-XXII)*, edited and translated by William Babcock, in *The Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New York City Press, 2013), 136.

<sup>55</sup> Couenhoven, "Eudaimonism, Virtue, and Self-sacrifice," 9.

<sup>56</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God," in *Selected Works, The Classics of Western Spirituality*, translated by G. R. Evans, 173-205 (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 193-195. In his work, Bernard divides love into four degrees. Firstly, love is related to the bodily nature that directs one to the neighbor and extends to the community. Secondly, love is revealed in the encounter with God. It means that one turns to God and loves him for his/her own good. Thirdly, loving God is for God's own sake. Finally, the ultimate degree of love is to love oneself for God's sake.

<sup>57</sup> Claudia Welz, *Love's Transcendence and the Problem of Theodicy* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2008), 114.

<sup>58</sup> Andreas Schuele, "Sharing and Loving: Love, Law, and the Ethics of Cultural Memory in the Pentateuch," in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, edited by William Schweiker, Charles T. Mathews (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 55.

neighbor-love involves.”<sup>59</sup> Due to their relational nature, one who loves him/herself also longs for loving and meaningful relationships by associating with others. Self-love thus meets one’s personal, interpersonal, and social needs.<sup>60</sup>

Second, self-love should be intended for the good of oneself and others. Following Thomas Aquinas’ view that love has an inclination toward the good and exists both in oneself and others, theologian Stephen Pope also elaborates, “At its deepest human level of meaning, ‘love’ refers to the agent’s complacency in good, a response of affective appreciation of an apprehended goodness.” For him, appreciation of an apprehended good is considered the acceptance of the person who willingly finds him/herself with the good. It entails the central moral meaning of self-love, which perceives his/her reality as being good.<sup>61</sup>

Third, the good is originally derived from God. As Aquinas defines it, the good in God is the *cause* of all good; its *effect* is found in ourselves, and its *similitude* is present in our neighbors.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Liz Carmichael supposes that proper self-love moves human beings to God and hence to others in God’s love.<sup>63</sup> The theological sense of self-love, thus, elucidates the possibility of one’s responding love that regards the self after loving God with one’s whole heart, soul, and strength (Mt 22:36-40). The divine-oriented self-love is eventually extended to others because it perceives the

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<sup>59</sup> Gene Outka, “Agapeistic Ethics,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 485.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Prasad Pinto, *Journey to Wholeness* (Bandra: St Pauls BYB, 2006), 106.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen J. Pope, “‘Our Brother’s Keeper’: Thomistic Friendship and Roger Burggraeve’s Ethic of Responsibility,” in *Responsibility, God and Society: Theological Ethics in Dialogue*, edited by Johan De Tavernier et al., (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 2008), 333-334.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature: Summa Theologiae I, 1-13*, translated by Brian J. Shanley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 234.

<sup>63</sup> Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 120.

“reality of being as good in its profound dignity within oneself as well as within others.”<sup>64</sup>

### A PLEA FOR PROPER SELF-SACRIFICE

The above proposition for proper self-love is also connected to proper self-sacrifice. True self-love or self-sacrifice is oriented toward the good. The essential perspective of self-love, which should combine the good of self and others, gives the language of self-sacrifice. It is unlikely to reduce the sacrificing self to the sacrificed self because the self must “survive the sacrifice itself, ready for repeated self-sacrifice.” Even in cases where one must look to free others from danger, he/she should remain alive since self-sacrifice does not consist of self-destruction.<sup>65</sup> As the feminist theologian Barbara Andolsen says, “women have a tendency to give themselves to others to such an extent that they lose themselves.”<sup>66</sup> Also, in a Confucianist culture, women sacrifice their entire lives, their desires, and even their interests for the good of the family and the community. That tendency “makes normative for women a set of values that ensure their subordination and, in some cases, even leads to a blind eye being turned to abuse.”<sup>67</sup> To counter this, John Lippitt claims that “true self-love and love of others are often inextricably linked.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, the question that is worth asking here is: how can we sacrifice ourselves without getting rid of ourselves?

First, human beings are self-interpreting creatures. The self-interpreting aspect requires a discernment that is context-specific. He/she must discern whether the sacrificial deed is adequate and proportional or not. Joseph Selling notes that human beings’ moral task is to deal appropriately with various circumstances in which

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<sup>64</sup> Mezgebu K. Feleke and Johan De Tavernier, “Selfishness, Self-interest, and Self-love,” *Vidyaiyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 75, no. 4 (2011): 300.

<sup>65</sup> Welz, “Love as Gift and Self-sacrifice,” 246.

<sup>66</sup> Barbara Andolsen, “Agape in Feminist Ethics,” in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A reader*, edited by L. K. Daly, 146-159 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 151.

<sup>67</sup> John Lippitt, “True Self-love and True Self-sacrifice,” *International Journal of Philosophy Religion* 66 (2009): 129.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

they find themselves.<sup>69</sup> Since the centrality of the good should be considered as part of one's ethical life, the account of self-interpretation is essential to drag one to his/her own self-love. One should not let oneself become a mere doormat as a form of extreme self-sacrifice.<sup>70</sup> Self-interpretation helps women see that what happens to them will positively and negatively affect their own lives. The assumptions of one's moral actions might begin with the self when one chooses to do this or that. Yet, following Emmanuel Levinas' thought, possible and significant deeds can arise from the face of the other, such as the baby's cry, the victim of domestic abuse, etc. It is the vulnerable other that questions our sense of moral responsibility.<sup>71</sup>

Second, creating a balance between self-sacrifice and self-love is a recognition of self-limitation. According to Ruth Groenhout, self-limitation is a continuity of selfhood. She says, "The limitations imposed are imposed by the self, implying that the self retains some sense of robust identity."<sup>72</sup> A self with a robust identity carries out a more positive life related to the good of the involved parties. It is accepting one's own good as a project within the communal good. One's own good project must include one's own health care, one's private space, and one's flourishing. Indeed, the self is no longer successful "in getting rid of itself and of its relatedness to others."<sup>73</sup> Next, Groenhout argues that "proper sacrifice must emphasize the worth of the self that is emptied out."<sup>74</sup> The worth of the self is identified with its intrinsic value because the sacrificial act is valued if the self is precious. Given that a sacrificial act does not resist oppression, it would promote the advance of evil.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Joseph Selling, *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 156-157.

<sup>70</sup> Lippitt, "True Self-love and True Self-sacrifice," 134.

<sup>71</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonse Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 199, 239. Also, Roger Burggraeve, "Affected by the Face of the Other. The Levinasian Movement from the Exteriority to the Interiority of the Infinite," *Dialegethai, Rivista Telematica di filosofia* 10 (2009): 5.

<sup>72</sup> Groenhout, "Kenosis and Feminist Theory," 296.

<sup>73</sup> Welz, "Love as Gift and Self-sacrifice," 246.

<sup>74</sup> Groenhout, "Kenosis and Feminist Theory," 302.

<sup>75</sup> Lippitt, "True Self-love and True Self-sacrifice," 132.

Third, true self-love is similarly defined as self-respect. Although self-respect may hold a critical feature of pride that manifests improper self-love, it builds and bespeaks a healthy love of self.<sup>76</sup> In other words, pride can nourish self-esteem when a positive view of oneself is nurtured. A positive view of oneself means acknowledging one's self-worth and recognizing that his/her life is meaningful and valuable. If the sense of one's self-worth is lost, he/she might not become a moral agent at all because anyone needs a minimum of self-regard to execute sufficient actions.<sup>77</sup> According to Russell, a minimum level of self-regard, in the first place, significantly builds up a virtuous person.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, besides person-centered aspects, a theocentric viewpoint significantly contributes to the inextricable link between true self-love and proper self-sacrifice. Since both self-love and self-sacrifice should be considered acts of love, human beings are taking part in God's love, which is the centrality of human morality.<sup>79</sup> According to theologian Richard Gula, "With God as the center of values for us, we need to see all things in their relation to God and to integrate all things into our love of God."<sup>80</sup> Richard Vacek imagines that as embodied beings, we might often be forgetful of others and become centers of ourselves, and our lives would be shrunken. If we forget our participation in God's love, "the core of a finally meaningful life is hollowed."<sup>81</sup> The biblical tradition manifests God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, whose concern is the fulfillment of each creature. God, whom John named 'love', shows love not only in the relationship with creation but also in God's self as an immanent love that transcends to the world. Since reflecting on that theocentric love, human beings are

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<sup>76</sup> T. Smith, "The Practice of Pride," in *Personal Virtues*, edited by C. Williams, 90-116 (London: Palgrave, 2005), 105.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>78</sup> Daniel Russell, "Aristotle on the Moral Relevance of Self-respect," in *Virtue Ethics: Old and New*, ed. S.M. Gardiner, 101-121 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 102.

<sup>79</sup> Edward Vacek, "Theocentric Love Ethics," *Religious Studies* 8, no. 224 (2017): 1-7.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 317.

<sup>81</sup> Vacek, "Theocentric Love Ethics," 3.

inspired by God's immanent love to fulfill our responsibility in true self-love. At the same time, true self-love is transcended outwardly to others since God's love is transcendental to the entire world.<sup>82</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Self-sacrifice without regard for the self is meaningless, and self-love without caring for other people is unacceptable. In the web of social relationships, neither self-sacrifice nor self-love are considered separate from each other. Indeed, the modern era is dominated by personal choices that promote egoism, so the place of self-sacrifice is often denied. On the other hand, a prevailing ideology of sacrifice in Confucianism and patriarchal cultures is unlikely to concern the selfhood of inferior bodies because they must fit into the hierarchical system. This system prefers behaviors based on cultural norms rather than allowing the full development of its subordinate members concerning physical, emotional, and intelligence aspects. Because of this subordination, many feminist scholars critiqued these phenomena of female subordination in the relationships with family members and women's unheard voices in the public sphere.<sup>83</sup> Hence, self-love is worth paying attention to because the purpose of a person's existence is to find happiness and respect in a responsible way. The love of self is to fulfill our duty to flourish as God's blessed beings from the beginning of creation. Both self-sacrifice and self-love are parts of human life. Self-sacrifice is the act of caring that is consciously offered to others. Besides, self-love should be recognized as one's basic need to fulfill God's creative gift given to everyone. One is the subject of oneself and one's sacrificial acts. Thus, one should carry both giving and receiving in his/her actions. Self-love and self-sacrifice are inextricably related to each other because they are core paradigms of the Christian heritage in which we experience God's immanent love of God's self and God's transcendent love towards the world.

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<sup>82</sup> Vacek, "Theocentric Love Ethics," 3.

<sup>83</sup> Howard M. Bahr and Kathleen S. Bahr, "Families and Self-sacrifice: Alternative Models and Meanings for Family Theory," *Social Forces* 79, no. 4 (2001): 1232.

They include the traits of goodness revealed in Jesus' teaching: love for God and loving neighbor as yourself, and that both should not be alien to ourselves.

**Huong Mai Xuan Tran,**  
*Sister of The Congregation of the Lover of  
the Holy Cross of Go Vap, Vietnam.*  
Ph.D. Student  
KU Leuven  
Liefdestraat 10, B-3300 Tienen, Belgium  
[maryxuanhuong@gmail.com](mailto:maryxuanhuong@gmail.com)