Studia Vincentiana
Volume 4, Number 1 (March 2026)

ISSN: 3026-5061
DOI: https://doi.org/10.35312/y230rj83

The Self-Giving One

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Abstract

This article proposes a renewed Christological perspective by presenting Jesus as "the self-giving one," drawing from key New Testament texts and their theological implications. Building on scriptural foundations such as 1 Timothy 2:6 and the recurring Gospel paradox of losing one's life to save it, the paper highlights self-giving as central to the identity and mission of Christ. The study further engages the concept of *anéantissement* (self-emptying) within the French School of Spirituality, especially in dialogue with Vincent de Paul, whose practical and missionary spirituality embodies this dynamic. By integrating biblical exegesis, spiritual theology, and contemporary reflection, the article demonstrates that self-emptying is not loss but fullness of life in God. Ultimately, it proposes self-giving as a transformative path for Christian discipleship today, rooted in Christ and oriented toward mission, service, and love.

Cet article propose une perspective christologique renouvelée en présentant Jésus comme « celui qui se donne », en s'appuyant sur des textes clés du Nouveau Testament et leurs implications théologiques. S'appuyant sur des fondements scripturaires tels que 1 Timothée 2, 6 et le paradoxe évangélique récurrent consistant à perdre sa vie pour la sauver, cet article met en évidence le don de soi comme élément central de l'identité et de la mission du Christ. L'étude aborde en outre le concept d'*anéantissement* (se dépouiller de soi) au sein de l'École française de spiritualité, notamment en dialogue avec Vincent de Paul, dont la spiritualité pratique et missionnaire incarne cette dynamique. En intégrant l'exégèse biblique, la théologie spirituelle et la réflexion contemporaine, l'article démontre que l'anéantissement n'est pas une perte, mais la plénitude de la vie en Dieu. En fin de compte, il propose le don de soi comme un chemin de transformation pour le disciple chrétien d'aujourd'hui, enraciné en Christ et orienté vers la mission, le service et l'amour.

Este artículo propone una perspectiva cristológica renovada al presentar a Jesús como «el que se entrega a sí mismo», basándose en textos clave del Nuevo Testamento y en sus implicaciones teológicas. Partiendo de fundamentos bíblicos como 1 Timoteo 2:6 y la paradoja evangélica recurrente de perder la vida para salvarla, el trabajo destaca la entrega de sí mismo como elemento central de la identidad y la misión de Cristo. El estudio aborda además el concepto de *anéantissement* (despojo de sí mismo) dentro de la Escuela Francesa de Espiritualidad, especialmente en diálogo con Vicente de Paúl, cuya espiritualidad práctica y misionera encarna esta dinámica. Al integrar la exégesis bíblica, la teología espiritual y la reflexión contemporánea, el artículo demuestra que el despojo de sí mismo no es pérdida, sino plenitud de vida en Dios. En última instancia, propone la entrega de sí mismo como un camino transformador para el

Published by Curia Generalizia della Congregazione della Missione, Rome, Italy in cooperation with Widya Sasana School of Philosophy Theology, Malang, Indonesia.

discipulado cristiano hoy en día, arraigado en Cristo y orientado hacia la misión, el servicio y el amor.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Vincent de Paul, Self-Emptying, Humility.

Shakespeare's Juliet famously asked:

> *What's in a name?*
> *That which we call a rose*
> *By any other name would smell as sweet.*[1]

But in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, names are very important. The author of Genesis carefully tells us the name that God gave to each of his creatures (Genesis 1:1-31). In the New Testament, Jesus asks his followers: "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 27-29; Matthew 16:13-18; Luke 9:18-20). Over the centuries, Christological studies have continually focused on the numerous names and titles given to Jesus: Emmanuel, Christ, Lord, Savior …

This article will proceed in six steps. It will:

1) suggest a name of Jesus that is not often used: the self-giving one.
2) analyze one of Jesus' most popular sayings, which focuses on self-giving.
3) describe *anéantissement* (annihilation or self-emptying) as used in the French School of Spirituality.
4) examine "annihilation" (*anéantissement)* and self-giving in the thought of Vincent de Paul, offering four reflections.
5) say a brief word about Simone Weil and self-emptying (which she called "décréation").
6) propose five brief thoughts about self-emptying today.

I. A NAME OF JESUS NOT OFTEN USED

Translations make a difference. Unfortunately, in polemical times they sometimes become weapons in theological controversies.[2] But in irenic moments when intellectual honesty and reasonable discourse characterize discussion, a change in translation can be eye-opening.

No one is clamoring for the change that I am suggesting but let me suggest that it will enrich the meaning of several New Testament texts. Basically, I propose that we add "the self-giving one" to the list of Jesus' names and titles.

Translations of 1 Tim 2:6 (here, I use the New American Bible) usually read like this: "For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all." The Greek text describes Christ as "*ὁ δοὺς ἑαυτόν*" which can aptly be translated as "the self-giving one,"

[1] *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2.
[2] Even translations of the Our Father and the Hail Mary have sometimes ignited fiery arguments.

so that the text will read: "For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, the self-giving one, the ransom for all."

Other Pauline texts use similar language. Galatians 1:3-4 speaks of "the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins."[3] Titus 2:13-14 praises Christ "our savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself up for us,"[4] Ephesians 5:25 states that "Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her."[5] Phil 2:7 uses a different verb, but with the same meaning: "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."[6]

All these texts describe Christ directly or equivalently as the "the self-giving one."

II. ONE OF JESUS' MOST POPULAR SAYINGS

Few sayings of Jesus appear in all four gospels, not even some of the most important ones. Not the words of the institution of the Eucharist, which appear nowhere in John. Not the Lord's Prayer, which appears only in Matthew and Luke. Not the eight beatitudes, which appear only in Matthew and, in a shorter form, in Luke. None of Jesus' great parables – not the memorable description of the last judgment in Matthew 25, not the story of the Good Samaritan, not the Prodigal Son, not the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Not one of the seven last words that Jesus spoke from the cross is repeated in all four gospels.

But there is a saying that all four evangelists record. In fact, in one form or another, it occurs six times in the New Testament: once in Mark (8:35), twice in Matthew (10:39 and 16:25), twice in Luke (9:24 and 17:33), and once in John (12:25).

This saying must have been extremely important for the early Christian communities since the New Testament repeats it so often. With small variations in each of the gospels, it reads: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

The meaning of the saying is straightforward. If we're stingy with our life, storing it up like a hidden treasure, we'll lose it. But if we give our life away generously, we'll get life back in abundance.

As happens so often in the gospels, each of the evangelists, in citing the saying, nuances it, so that it echoes other themes in his gospel.

Mark's gospel, the earliest of the texts, cites Jesus as stating that whoever loses his life "for my sake and for the sake of the gospel" will preserve it. He is the only evangelist to add "for the sake of the gospel."

Matthew cites the saying twice, once as he found it in Mark and then as he found it in another tradition (which scholars call Q, signifying the German word for "source" and referring to a lost collection of the sayings of Jesus). When echoing Mark, Matthew

[3] τοῦ δόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν.
[4] ὃς ἔδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν.
[5] ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς.
[6] ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών.

too has Jesus urging the disciples to lose their life "for my sake," but, for reasons that are not evident, he omits "for the sake of the gospel."

When Luke cites the saying, he adds two important nuances that are typical of his gospel. First, while in the other gospels Jesus addresses this saying just to his disciples, Luke, in his ninth chapter, states that the saying is addressed to *all*. Clearly then for Luke, the key to life for *everyone* is to give your life away! Secondly, Luke attaches this saying to another about taking up your cross *daily* (none of the other evangelists adds that word). So, for Luke, this is an everyday key to life: if we hold on to life day after day, we lose it; if we give it away one day after another, we find it.

In John's gospel, where the saying emerges from a third, typically Johannine, tradition, Jesus promises "eternal life" to those who give their life away. Eternal life is a central theme for John.

To sum it up, the saying flows into the New Testament from at least three independent sources: Mark, the lost Q, and the Johannine tradition. There are also many echoes of this saying in other places in the New Testament, in the Talmud, and in intertestamental literature.[7]

III. "ANNIHILATION" AND THE FRENCH SCHOOL OF SPIRITUALITY

Anéantissement, or "annihilation," is a term commonly used in the so-called French School of Spirituality.[8] It refers to the radical self-emptying that is needed for true union with God. Key seventeenth-century figures in France like Pierre de Bérulle and Charles de Condren, both of whom were influential in the life of Vincent de Paul, emphasized it. Jean-Jacques Olier and Jean Eudes, each of whom Vincent admired, developed the concept further.

By Vincent's time, the language of *anéantissement* had spread beyond theological circles. On April 16, 1633, Madame Goussault wrote to him:

> *Well now, Father. I am writing to you, trusting that you will praise God and love Him for His infinite mercy. I cannot tell you the graces He granted me here and in Saumur, in spite of my very great unfaithfulness. I should be transported with love towards Him. Father, pray that He will bring down my pride in any way He sees fit. I am ready to lose everything and to leave everything, preferring humility to all consolations and possessions. The example of my Savior is very powerful; He left the bosom of His Father to come and practice it in poverty and self-abasement* (*anéantissement*).[9]

The ultimate model for self-emptying is Christ, who laid aside his divine status to become human, an act that lies at the heart of Christian theology and of the French mystical tradition. Having become human, he surrendered his life freely by dying for his

[7] Cf. **Kenosis & Theology | Gregory Eran Gronbacher.**
[8] Henri Bremond, in his classic treatise (*Histoire du sentiment religieux en France*, 1921, 3:3-4), first popularized the term French School of Spirituality.
[9] CCD:I:195.

friends. In doing this, he received fullness of life and became the source of unending life for others.

The key components of *anéantissement*, as taught by the French School, are:

- **Adherence to Christ's "states":** The practice of *anéantissement* is utterly Christocentric. We strive to conform our lives to the various "states" or "mysteries" of Jesus' life, especially his self-abasement in the Incarnation and Crucifixion. The Greek term *kenosis*, meaning "self-emptying" (Phil 2:7), is central for understanding *anéantissement*. It refers to Jesus' act of emptying himself, first in becoming human and then in dying on the cross.
- **Self-emptying and fullness of live:** A lively awareness of God's majesty leads us to a sense of our own nothingness. The goal of the spiritual life is to strip away all ego-driven motivations so that we become vessels for divine action.
- **Action of the Holy Spirit:** While self-denial is a pre-condition, the work of spiritual transformation is the action of the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of Jesus," within each person.
- **Finding the true self:** The paradox of *anéantissement* is that we find our true self by losing it. It is a path to fulfillment since it creates room for God's presence to fill us.

There were many antecedents to the theology taught by Bérulle, Condren, Olier, and Eudes. The Rhineland mystics and Teresa of Avila had a profound influence on early seventeen-century figures like Benedict of Canfield and Madame Acarie, to whom the French School owed an enormous debt. In the background, one also hears echoes of the teaching of Meister Eckhart, Tauler, and Ruysbroec on *Nichtung* (*nothingness).*[10]

IV. SELF-EMPTYING AND SELF-GIVING IN VINCENT'S THOUGHT

Today, scholars recognize that Vincent de Paul cannot easily be classified as a member of the French School. His theology was eclectic and practical. He drank from very varied sources, depending on the circumstances. He rarely wrote or spoke theoretically. His letters and talks focused, for the most part, on action. But he listened well and was inevitably influenced by the French School's most articulate voices, some of whom were his guides at various points in his life. As a result, self-emptying and self-giving held a prominent place in his life and teaching. Four examples, among many others, make that clear, but they also illustrate his practical approach to a topic that at times may seem quite abstract.

1. God abhors a vacuum.

Vincent loved this image. In describing the vocation of the members of the Congregation of the Mission, he told the priests and brothers: "As soon as we empty ourselves of self, God will fill us with himself; for He can't stand a vacuum."[11]

[10] Often described as "not willing, not knowing, not having."
[11] CCD:XI:2.

During a meeting of the General Council of the Daughters on February 27, 1656, he said to the sisters: "You must rejoice when the Company is underestimated … For, you see, it's the same with us as with nature, a characteristic of which is never to leave a vacuum without filling it, and experience proves this in many ways. When people want to mine a city, they tunnel under it, and when the explosives are lit, the place blows up because of nature's eagerness to be filled. God acts the same way; He can't leave a vacuum. As we empty ourselves of self and of the desire to be noticed, esteemed, and respected, God will fill our souls with graces and blessings, giving to each according to the degree of perfection He demands of her, and to the Company in general for the accomplishment of His plans. Let's ask this of God for one another, dear Sisters."[12]

2. It is an infallible maxim that, if we empty ourselves of self, God will fill us.

Vincent came back to this "infallible maxim" repeatedly.

He told the priests and brothers: "Take my word for it, my dear confreres, take my word for it, it's an infallible maxim of Jesus Christ, which I've often proclaimed to you on His behalf, that, as soon as a heart is empty of self, God fills it. God remains and acts in it; and it's the desire for shame that empties us of ourselves; that's humility, holy humility. Then it won't be ourselves acting but God acting in us, and all will go well."[13]

In 1656, he expressed himself eloquently in giving advice to a young superior, Antoine Durand: "No, Father, neither philosophy, nor theology, nor discourses can act in souls; Jesus Christ must be involved in this with us – or we with Him – so that we may act in Him and He in us, that we may speak as He did and in His Spirit, as He himself was in His Father, and preached the doctrine He had taught Him; those are the words of Holy Scripture. So, Father, you must empty yourself of self in order to clothe yourself with Jesus Christ. You know that ordinary causes produce the effects of their nature: a sheep produces a sheep, etc., and a human, another human. Likewise, if the man who directs and forms others and speaks to them is animated with only a human spirit, those who see him, listen to him, and strive to imitate him will become totally human. No matter what he says and does, he'll inspire them with only the appearance of virtue, and not the substance. He'll communicate to them the spirit with which he himself is animated, as we see that masters impress their maxims and ways of acting firmly on the minds of their disciples."[14]

3. Humility, detachment, and obedience are indispensable elements in self-emptying.

The keys to self-emptying, Vincent emphasized, are humility, detachment, and obedience.

In a conference on humility given on April 18, 1659, he spoke movingly about the beauty of humility: "Our Lord is giving many in the Company the grace of acquiring this virtue swiftly, animating their actions with the desire of their own self-emptying (*anéantissement*) and doing everything to remain hidden and to humble themselves. Grant all of us the grace, my God – all of us – to have no other desire, and that humility may be the virtue of the Mission. O holy virtue, how beautiful you are! O Little Company, how

[12] CCD:XIIIb:337.
[13] CCD:XI:281.
[14] CCD:XI:311.

loving you will be if God gives you this grace! Take careful note of this: if ever you've heard others talk about some good thing that was done in the Company, you'll see that it's because they saw in it some small trace of humility, some lowly, abject actions, such as instructing peasants and serving poor persons."[15]

Speaking colorfully about their rules a month later, he told the priests and brothers: "There have been some in the Company who, because they weren't sent to study after their seminary as they expected, grumbled, complained, and made such a fuss that it's really sad. But … didn't you come here to do God's Will and not your own, to obey and not to study? Oh well! You're not going to study. This child of your mind is keeping you attached; this immoderate attachment is holding you prisoner. Go, learn how to free yourself and to be open to God's Will. Let that be your lesson. Some have the passion for becoming priests before the time; others, for preaching, for debating, for being engaged in a certain work, for coming and going. There are few who don't have their beloved Isaac. But we have to give him up. We have to empty our hearts of any love other than that of God, and of any will other than that of obedience."[16]

In 1659, talking with his confreres about the five virtues that should characterize missionaries, he stated: "So then, humility, which consists in emptying ourselves completely before God, overcoming ourselves in order to place God in our heart, not seeking the esteem and good opinion of others, and struggling constantly against any impulse of vanity. Ambition causes a person to establish himself, to seek to become well known so that people will say, 'Look at him!' Humility causes us to empty ourselves of self so that God alone may be manifest, to whom glory may be given."[17]

4. The Eucharist highlights Jesus' self-emptying.

The French School consistently linked Jesus' self-emptying with the Eucharist.[18] Vincent made the same connection. Within the Vincentian Family today, we often cite a saying of Vincent's: "Love is inventive even to infinity."[19] Ordinarily, we use this citation to motivate people to be creative pastorally, to respond to new forms of poverty, to be innovative in setting up new formation programs for lay leaders and for the clergy, and to investigate ways of rooting out the causes of poverty. But apt as this rhetorical use of Vincent's words might be, their actual context was quite different. They refer to the institution of the Eucharist. Vincent, in speaking to a dying brother in 1645, exhorted him to think of God's mercy. After describing many of the signs of God's tender love, he told the brother: "Since love is inventive to infinity, after being affixed to the infamous stake of the cross to win the hearts and souls of those by whom He wishes to be loved – not to mention all the other innumerable schemes He used for this purpose during His time spent among us – foreseeing that His absence could cause some forgetfulness or cooling off in our hearts, he wanted to avoid this danger by instituting the Most August Sacrament, in which He is as truly and substantially present as He is in heaven above. However, seeing that, if He wanted to humble and empty himself (*anéantir*) even more than He had done in His Incarnation and could make himself in some way more like us – or at least make

[15] CCD:XII:167-68.
[16] CCD:XII:197.
[17] CCD:XII:247.
[18] Raymond Deville, *L'école française de spiritualité* (Desclée, 1987), 106-107.
[19] CCD:XI:146.

us more like Him – He caused this venerable Sacrament to serve us as food and drink, intending by this means that the same union and resemblance that exist between nature and substance should occur spiritually in each human person. Because love can do and will everything, He willed it thus."[20]

V. SIMONE WEIL, SELF-EMPTYING, AND "DÉCRÉATION"

Albert Camus called Simone Weil (1909-1943) "the only great spirit of our time." André Gide found her "the most truly spiritual writer of this century." T. S. Eliot said that she had "genius akin to that of a saint." Her life and writings have influenced people as diverse as Charles De Gaulle and Pope Paul VI.[21]

Born in 1909 into a cultured family in Paris, Weil had a privileged childhood. Her family's roots were Jewish, but her parents were agnostic. An academic prodigy, Simone left a teaching career to become a factory worker so that she could experience the lot of the working class. Though she tended toward pacifism, she fought against the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. An agnostic, her hunger for beauty, virtue, and goodness led her to believe that anyone can enter "the kingdom of truth" if he or she "longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all their attention on its attainment."[22] But she doubted the possibility of a "real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God" until one day "Christ himself came down and took possession of me."[23]

She had several striking mystical experiences that focused her steadfastly on Christ. While in Portugal on holiday in 1935, she came upon a group of villagers singing hymns and felt a powerful connection to something beyond the human. She described this as her first glimpse of the divine. At Assisi in 1937, in the tiny chapel where St. Francis had prayed, she experienced a profound spiritual pull and felt compelled to fall on her knees and remain there in prayer. A year later, while reciting George Herbert's "Love III," she felt Christ take her over completely:

> Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
> Guilty of dust and sin.
> But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
> If I lacked any thing.
>
> A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
> Love said, You shall be he.
> I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
> I cannot look on thee.
> Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
> Who made the eyes but I?
>
> Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

[20] CCD:XI:131-32.
[21] Cf. Judith Thurman, **"The Supreme Contradictions of Simone Weil"**. *The New Yorker* (September 2, 2024).
[22] Cf. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (HarperCollins, 1951), 23.
[23] *Ibid*., 29.

Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

From then on, her writings had a concentrated spiritual focus. She wrote a profound commentary on the Greek text of the Our Father. She saw the Eucharist as central in creation and *décréation.*[24] Her reflections on beauty were extraordinary.[25]

Still, she refused baptism and remained religiously unaffiliated throughout her life, but the reality of her religious experiences never left her.

Weil left France when the Nazis invaded and joined the French resistance in London. As an act of solidarity, she decided to eat the same rations as those who were serving in the trenches. During the summer of 1943, she contracted tuberculosis and, weakened by malnourishment, died within weeks. Her severe asceticism probably caused her early death.

She published little in her lifetime, but her scattered writings, especially those about self-emptying, fascinated many of her contemporaries. Soon afterward her death, friends and admirers like Fr. Joseph-Marie Perrin and the famous Albert Camus pieced her thoughts together in book form.

Weil revived the self-emptying theme. What the seventeenth-century French School of Spirituality called *anéantissement*, she called *décréation*.

For her, attention is the purest form of love. It is the soul's way of saying, "I see you." It is like a sharp knife which carves through the noise of existence that constantly deafens us.

To focus on something — being attentive to a starving child, reading a page of ancient Greek or Sanskrit (which she taught herself to read), or praying in silence — means to forget oneself and to confront reality as it is.

In *Waiting for God,* Weil stated that, to imitate God, we must renounce all power and autonomy. She called this process *décréation*, which she described as "passive activity" or, based on her childhood readings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, "non-active action."[26]

She saw that the human person is inevitably subject to physical and social laws. Our entire life, except for the movement of grace, is governed by forces like gravity. While physical and social laws are bound up with creation, *décréation* is a work of grace.

Weil felt that the self, or the "I," continually creates a world built on illusions: imagined debts that people owe us, rewards that we fantasize about receiving. These figments of imagination become primary motivators in everyday human behavior.

[24] Her thoughts in this regard are remarkably similar to those of Vincent de Paul, as well as to those of many members of the so-called French School.
[25] Cf. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (HarperCollins, 1951), 112-117.
[26] Cf. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (HarperCollins, 1951), 28.

But alertness to reality, rather than to illusions, requires detachment: the stripping away of fantasies and the deconstruction of the "I." This requires a spiritual discipline that suspends the imagination and opens us up to truth. Only in emptiness can we encounter the presence of God, which is present in everything that exists but is veiled by imagination.

Weil regarded the great challenge in life as obedience, which she saw as taking two forms. One is mechanical, driven by imagined righteousness or the desire for divine rewards – an obedience rooted in self-deception. The other is a form of pure attention: a gaze that is fixed on the real relationship that exists among things, free from self-interest. Pure attention is the only true basis for action because it does not seek reward or justification.

She insists that true freedom lies in the voluntary destruction of the self. The loss of self, when embraced through *décréation*, allows the soul to participate in the divine act of creation.

Décréation was central to Weil's mysticism. She experienced it vividly in her contacts with Christianity. Like the seventeenth-century writers discussed above, she believed that God, out of love, emptied himself of divinity so that the world of creation might take form. And just as, in creation, God emptied Himself of divinity, so too in *décréation*, the human person, imitating God, empties himself or herself of what creation has given him so that he can participate in life as God wills.

Décréation, in practice, is a process. As we give up all attachments and fantasies, God's life begins to fill us.[27]

VI. FIVE THOUGHTS ON SELF-EMPTYING TODAY

Today, self-emptying (*anéantissement)* is much less in vogue than in Vincent's time or in Simone Weil's. The great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Rahner, once asked: "Today, where do we find 'holy follies'? Does a spiritual director these days have to restrain his clients from such deeds?"

Still, though the terminology that is used to describe it has varied greatly – *anéantissement*, *décréation*, self-denial, mortification – self-emptying is a perennial theme. In addition to the traditional means often recommended for putting it into practice, let me suggest five thoughts which I hope will be particularly relevant today.

1. Ideally, asceticism is functional.

Self-emptying, self-giving, and fulfillment go together.

In this sense, today we speak of "functional asceticism," to use Karl Rahner's phrase.[28] Self-denial is always for the sake of something or someone else. In a Christian context, it is "for my sake and for the gospels." We give up good things not because we think they are bad. We acknowledge that they are good even as we give them up, because we want something better. A person may decide to cut out smoking because he wants to be in good health, or to cut down on or abstain from drinking because he or she wants to be

[27] For a fuller discussion on Weil, cf. Zahra Qasemzadeh & Mostafa Mousavi Azam, "Decreation in Simone Weil's Theology." *Religions & Mysticism*, vol. 54, no. 1 (Summer/Autumn 2021), pp. 195-215.
[28] Karl Rahner. *Theological Investigations* VIII, 208.

clear-headed and self-possessed in thinking, judging, and acting. A person may embrace celibacy "to be concerned about the Lord's affairs"[29] or to dedicate himself or herself single-mindedly to the service of the Kingdom, or to go wherever the Lord asks them to go, or to give themselves over to a life of prayer. A person may renounce material possessions because he wants to share them with the poor or because she wants to enter into solidarity with the poor by experiencing their lot. A person may renounce his freedom to choose whatever he or she wants to do because he chooses to live in community and join with others in a common life and common project.

In this sense, the real purpose of self-denial is to choose and construct one's real self.[30]

2. Social Media present a formidable, ubiquitous challenge.

Today, we continually read about the crisis of attention, a theme that would surely have resonated with Simone Weil. Parents, teachers, and social critics lament how profoundly social media have captured the attention of so many (both young and old) and deafened them, so that they no longer hear the deepest voices of reality. In recent days, I have jotted down phrases (mostly complaints) that I have come across in newspapers and periodicals:

- The TV is on all the time.
- Their cell phones are always in their hand.
- Earphones are constantly in their ears.
- Attention spans are shrinking.
- There are endless distractions.
- They are unable to focus for any length of time.
- They experience high rates of loneliness and depression.
- Widespread misinformation floods the media.
- There is a need for digital detoxification.

On December 10, 2025, Australia banned access to social media platforms for children under sixteen years of age. This attracted worldwide attention. As of late 2025 in the United States, where I am writing, thirty-five states and the District of Columbia have laws or policies requiring schools to ban or restrict student cellphone use. These policies vary in their scope, from prohibiting phones only during instructional time to banning them for the entire school day.

What might be reasonable policies in schools and at home? Do parents dialogue with their children about the media and about regulating their use?

3. What we pay attention to shapes us.

[29] 1 Cor 7:34.

[30] Cf. Myles, *op. cit.*, 96-97: "The *same* energy that originally organized the person's pursuit of sex, power, and possessions can be removed from the socially conditioned self and relocated in the religious self. ... The real point of ascetic practices, then was not to "give up" objects, but to reconstruct the self."

Matthew 6:21 tells us: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart also be." We become what captures our mind and heart. This makes it imperative that we empty ourselves to open space for the presence of God.

Two problems infect social media in epidemic proportions:

a) the enticements of a consumer society

Advertisements continually tell us that we need more. Media easily track our interests and send us messages and images specifically fitted to our personal tastes. When these are attractive and timely, they lure us into purchases. Meanwhile, the poorest of the poor go hungry, lack clean water and sanitation facilities, and often remain voiceless.

b) Pornography

Pornography is highly addictive, even more so than alcohol or cigarettes. It floods the media and is easy to access. A single click makes it accessible. It is a multi-billion-dollar industry. In my own country:

- 61% of the general population report viewing pornography.
- 78% of men watch pornography.
- 44% of women watch pornography.

Minors are quickly introduced to porn on their computers and cell phones.

Are we making any progress in finding ways to resist the enticements of a consumer society and the allurement of pornography? Are we able to empty our minds and hearts so that God's presence can fill us?

4. Will we move forward on a "digital highway" or suffer "digital bombardment"?

Both Pope Francis and Pope Leo have encouraged the use of the "digital highway"[31] for good communication, but both have also urged asceticism in the use of social media.[32] Soon after beginning his papacy, Pope Leo gave an Address to Catholic Digital Missionaries and Influencers. While he encouraged the positive uses of media, he also urged his listeners "to weave other nets: networks of relationships, of love, of gratuitous sharing where friendship is profound and authentic; networks where we can mend what has been broken, heal from loneliness, not focus on the number of followers, but experience the greatness of infinite Love in every encounter; networks that give space to others more than to ourselves, where no 'bubble' can silence the voices of the weakest; networks that liberate and save; networks that help us rediscover the beauty of looking into each other's eyes; networks of truth. In this way, every story of shared goodness will be a knot in a single, immense network: the network of networks, the network of God. Be agents of communion, capable of breaking down the logic of division and polarization, of individualism and egocentrism. Center yourselves on Christ, so as to overcome the

[31] Pope Francis, "World Communications Day 2014 message."

[32] Pope Francis, ***Christus Vivit ("Christ is Alive!")***, released on March 25, 2019, was the pope's *Apostolic Exhortation on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.* It included a section analyzing "the digital environment" that endangers society in ways we need to take more seriously. This wake-up call about today's news-sharing tools intensifies the responsibility Catholics and all advocates of the common good should feel toward the hearts and minds of so-called "digital natives."

logic of the world, of fake news, of frivolity, with the beauty and light of Truth (cf. *Jn* 8:31-32)."[33]

5. A healthy contemporary asceticism will balance a positive use of media with a self-emptying that opens space for God and for others. This requires courageous, disciplined decisions.

Young people today are digital natives. Those of us who are older are digital immigrants. Both groups use media continually. I am doing research and writing this article on my computer, as ads and messages vie for my attention (and sometimes capture it!).

The balanced use of media will become an even greater challenge as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) continues to expand.

Busy as he was, Vincent de Paul recognized that emptying himself was essential so that God might fill him. On February 28, 1647, he wrote to Jean Martin, the superior of the priests and brothers in Genoa: "May it please His Infinite Goodness to grant us the grace that all may strive for the advancement of His glory and our own self-emptying (*anéantissement*)![34]

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[33] **To Influencers and Digital Missionaries (29 July 2025)**.
[34] CCD:III:160.

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